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OR,

Mad Madge, the Outlaw Queen.

A RAILWAY ROMANCE.

BY COL. A. F. HOLT,

AUTHOR OF "BLACK BUCKSKIN," "THE DANDY
SPORT," "LITTLE LIGHTFOOT," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

A STRANGE CONSIGNMENT.

"COME, boys, get a move on you! It's almost
starting-time, so you'll need to stir your stumps.
Fire them in lively, now! That's the talk!"

The speaker was one of Wells, Fargo & Co's
trusty Express-messengers, who, standing within
the open door of his car, was busily engaged in
receiving the miscellaneous assortment of boxes,

IT WAS, INDEED, MAD MADGE, QUEEN OF THE TRAIN-WRECKERS, WHO STOOD BEFORE
THE ASTONISHED YOUNG ENGINEER!

bundles and what not that poured upon him in a seemingly endless shower.

The scene was the railway station at Grandon, a thriving Western town, just prior to the departure of the evening Mail and Express. The latter was already made up and in position, headed by a monster iron-horse, resplendent in bright paint and highly-polished brasses, that throbbed and thrilled as if eager to be off on its impetuous career. Six elegant coaches, together with mail, Express and baggage cars, went to make up this important train which, leaving Grandon late in the afternoon, made a long but rapid run westward to Richton, reaching that point shortly after midnight.

Hundreds of hurrying people thronged the spacious platforms—belated passengers, train-hands, cabmen and truckmen, newsboys, messengers and countless others, all jostling and elbowing one another as they hastened in various directions, while the incessant rattle of baggage-trucks and the shouts of the busy workers served to augment the uproar and excitement peculiar to an important railway station at train-time.

Amid the universal bustle and confusion the Express-car before-mentioned, presented, perhaps, the busiest scene of all. A belated van, heavily laden, had only just arrived, and a force of brawny truckmen were hard at work transferring its contents to the door of the car where the messenger and his assistant waited to receive them. With but a few moments remaining in which to complete their work, these lusty fellows toiled with such herculean energy that the men in the car found themselves in imminent danger of being buried beneath the perfect avalanche of miscellaneous articles that poured incessantly upon them.

Boxes and packages of every shape and size, from a dry-goods case down to a tiny parcel, flew from van to truck and from truck to car with astonishing rapidity, when suddenly from the conglomerate mass was unearthed an object quite out of the ordinary run of Express matter, and which received a trifle more than usual attention from the hurrying truckmen. It was a rough pine box, about seven by three, and its very shape was grimly suggestive of the hidden contents. There was something peculiarly weird and uncanny about this humble box and its inanimate burden, sufficiently so to inspire the awe of these rough-and-ready men, for a dead hush took the place of their usual shouts, while they exercised a care in handling it that was quite at variance with their customary recklessness.

Not enough so, however, to satisfy a certain individual who hovered close at hand, watching the course of the box with an air of great solicitude. He was a queer little old man, apparently bent with age, with long, gray beard falling to his waist, and twinkling black eyes that peered sharply from beneath the shaggy brows. He was shabbily attired, and might be taken for a native of the back districts, judging from the nervous, undecided air with which he contemplated his surroundings.

When the pine box was raised on high by a dozen sinewy arms, this queer old fellow immediately rushed forward, making his presence known by a series of excited exclamations delivered in shrill, high-pitched tones.

"Be keeful, there, yeou fellers!" he screamed. "Don't handle that 'ere box as if 'twas a bundle o' rags, for it contains the earthly remains o' my poor ole brother Bill, an' a better chap never cavorted up an' down God's footstool. I'm a-sendin' him home to the old folks, and durn me if I don't believe he'll arrive there in more'n a thousan' pieces, judgin' by the way you 'tarnal railroad folks is bangin' things around."

Displaying an agility astonishing in one of his years, the stranger gave a bound which landed him inside the Express-car.

"Poor Bill! It's powerful tough to hev to leave ye to the tender mercy o' these railroad hustlers, but I reckon thar's no help for it. Howsumdever, I'll see to it that ye ride as comfortable as possible under the circumstances. I s'pose, mister," he went on, addressing the Express-messenger, "thar's no objection to my arrangin' this box sort of cozy-like. Ye see, I've planked down a right smart sum for the transportation of my brother's remains, an' it kinder goes ag'in' my grain to have him buried under forty ton weight o' rubbish."

"All right, my friend! Fix him up to suit yourself. If you'll place the box in yonder vacant corner, I'll guarantee your deceased relative will enjoy his long journey unmolested. But, make haste, partner, for we are off in just one minute."

And laughing good-naturedly, the messenger turned once more to his task, while the old man,

unaided, proceeded to drag his precious box to its allotted corner. This done, he stood over it apparently lost in contemplation of the manifold virtues of his departed fraternal relative.

Clang! went the great depot gong, the waiting conductor shouted "All aboard!" and, an instant later, the long train was in motion. The last package of Express matter was thrown in even as the car started, and now Roy Noble, the Express-messenger, turned hurriedly to his queer old visitor who stood seemingly oblivious of the fact that the train was under way.

"Look sharp, my friend! Don't you know the train has started?" he cried, sharply; and the old man turned with a violent start.

"Sakes alive, ye don't say so!" he exclaimed. "Waal, Bill, I s'pose I must leave ye. Wish I c'd stay with ye to the end, but circumstances won't allow it. Good-by, old fellow! An' say, Mr. Expressman, take good care o' poor Bill, an' see that he's let off easy when he gets to Branford."

Bestowing a last affectionate glance at the box that inclosed his deceased relative's remains, the old fellow jumped from the slowly-moving car to the platform, where he stood industriously applying a red cotton handkerchief to his eyes, and gazing after the train until it had disappeared from view.

"A queer old customer, that," remarked Roy Noble, seating himself upon a crate to enjoy a few moments' rest before beginning the work of assorting the miscellaneous pile of merchandise that surrounded him—a privilege he was enabled to take because the train ran a considerable distance before making its first stop.

"Ay, the rustiest old rooster from Wayback that I ever sot my two peepers on," rejoined the messenger's assistant, a rollicking youth named Tim Tupper. "Mighty particular, too, about his poor brother Bill. Reckon he oughter engage a special palace car to transport the cadaver in. I, for one, don't keef for sich ghostly company, hanged if I do."

The speaker cast a suspicious glance toward the long pine box, lying there in that dimly-lighted corner, as though fearful that its ghastly occupant might burst suddenly from his prison and confront him.

"Well, Tim, I'll admit that such a neighbor is not altogether desirable; but if the Company sees fit to accept a consignment of that nature, of course we, as its humble servants, have no right to object. 'brother Bill' will not harm either of us, I reckon, and we'll soon be rid of his company."

"Not until we strike Branford, and that is more'n half the run," growled Tim, by no means pleased at the prospect. "However, I reckon I'll manage to weather it somehow."

"Yonder box and its contents don't worry me in the least," declared the messenger; "though there are other more important matters on my mind, which, to tell the truth, are causing me no little uneasiness."

Roy Noble's handsome countenance, usually beaming with smiles, now bore unmistakable traces of anxiety; and it was with much surprise that his companion now observed the change.

"Why, pard, what has struck you, now?" he exclaimed. "Never saw you look so serious before. What's up?"

The Express-messenger laughed a short, uneasy laugh.

"Oh, there's really nothing the matter, Tim. I'm merely indulging in the objectionable practice of borrowing trouble. Very foolish, I'll admit; nevertheless, I can't help it."

"Pooh! Is that all?" snorted Tim, in disgust. "Why, you look as woebegone as a feller that's sentenced to be electrocuted; what the dickens are ye borrowin' trouble about, anyway?"

"Well, Tim, there's an extra responsibility resting on my shoulders, to-night. Listen!" and he lowered his voice to a confidential whisper, as though fearful that the very car itself had ears. "Yonder safe contains a fortune, Tim—a veritable fortune! In fact, this is by far the most valuable consignment ever placed in my charge during my connection with this Company."

"You don't say so!"

"I do. In addition to an unusually large number of packages containing money, jewelry and other valuables, there is one particular item that exceeds in value all the rest combined."

"And that is—"

"A package consigned to the Richville National Bank. It contains a cool hundred thousand dollars in crisp new treasury-notes."

Tim Tupper's eyes protruded like peeled onions, and he gave a prolonged whistle to express his astonishment.

"Je-rusalem! That's a powerful lot o' swag!" he commented.

"Just so. And as I am responsible for its safe delivery, do you wonder that I feel the least bit nervous?"

"There's no need of worry, I reckon. The stuff'll reach its destination all right. What's to hinder?"

"Nothing, probably; but several things, possibly. For instance, there have been a number of Express robberies in the history of this line. Others are just as liable to occur. If the knights of the road should capture this car, to-night, what a harvest they would reap!"

"True; but the aforesaid knights are not so promiscuous in these parts as they might be. It is over a year since Nick Norman's gang was wiped out, right after they held up an excursion on the Belmont Branch, an' nothin' has been done in that line since."

"But that is no guaranty of immunity in the future. It is the unexpected that always happens, and in this wild country one cannot be too cautious."

"Well, I reckon it'd take a mighty smart gang o' robbers to gain an entrance to this car," Tim Tupper declared. "With good stout doors, locked and larded, and trusty revolvers in our fists, we c'd bid 'em all defiance. We're perfectly safe from outsiders. The only danger is that 'brother Bill' yonder might take a notion to come out of his box an' try for that hundred thousand. Ha, ha!"

So absurd was Tim's remark that the Express-messenger was forced to smile.

"I do not anticipate any trouble from that source," he said, "and I certainly hope there will be none from any other. However, I shall not breathe freely until the trip is ended. But come, Tim! We are wasting too much time in idle talk. There's a lot of work ahead of us, and we'll need to hump ourselves to get things straightened out before the next stop."

In another moment the two men were industriously at work.

CHAPTER II.

THE ROBBERY.

THE long train rolled on its rapid way, steadily leaving mile after mile behind, now drawing up at a lustling station, then steaming swiftly on again through long stretches of fertile fields and virgin forests. Night had succeeded day, and gleaming lights that flashed like fireflies marked the course of the train as it sped along in the darkness.

Within the Express-car, the gloom was but partially relieved by the dingy kerosene lamps that hung suspended from the ceiling. The motion of the car caused these lights to sway and flicker in an eccentric manner, throwing fantastic shadows on every hand.

The corner that contained the long pine box was almost entirely shrouded in darkness, for a quantity of other articles had been piled so as to shut out the rays of the nearest lamp, at the same time hiding the death-box from the view of the living occupants of the car.

The latter were now enjoying a brief period of ease, for the train had just left a station and entered a long stretch of unbroken country, with the next stopping-place nearly twenty miles distant. The messenger was idly turning the leaves of his receipt-book, while Tim Tupper, perched on an improvised seat of boxes, was endeavoring to read the latest novel by aid of the feeble light that danced and flickered overhead.

Neither gave a single thought to "poor brother Bill," lying there in his narrow coffin; and this utter disregard proved, indeed, unfortunate for both, for had they chanced to visit that dimly-lighted corner, they might have witnessed a very remarkable scene.

One end of that innocent-appearing box suddenly commenced to move inward, swinging slowly, noiselessly, like a door on well-oiled hinges. Then, through the spacious opening thus created, a human head protruded.

When but a few minutes previous, Tim Tupper had laughingly mentioned the possibility of "brother Bill" emerging from his box, he of course intended it as a jest; but now that prediction seemed actually about to be fulfilled!

Nor was this phenomenon attributable to any supernatural agency. It was but the result of remarkable human ingenuity. One end of the box, while seemingly a solid part of the whole, was really a shrewdly contrived door swinging inward, and operated from the inside by means of a concealed spring. It fitted perfectly into place, and was well calculated to defy detection.

The coffin supposed to be contained within this box was conspicuous by its absence, but the

"corpse" itself was there, and an exceedingly lively one he seemed to be. The easy snake-like manner in which "brother Bill" issued from his narrow prison would have electrified the Expressmen close by, if they had witnessed the performance.

Then, too, they would have understood why the queer old man at Grandon was so particular about placing the box in a spot where it was likely to remain undisturbed; for had it chanced to be beneath a pile of other articles, the "corpse" would have found it extremely difficult to operate his secret door successfully.

But why such extraordinary proceedings? What was meant by the presence of this cunningly-contrived box and its mysterious occupant? The question was destined to be speedily answered.

On hands and knees, the supposed dead man crept stealthily behind a pile of merchandise that effectually screened him from view. Then he slowly rose to his full height, revealing a slender but well-knit frame, evidently that of a mere youth. He was clad in close-fitting garments, and a black mask effectually concealed his face. In his right hand he held a short but heavy club, while the other clutched a cocked revolver.

Truly a formidable-looking "corpse," viewed in the weird lamp-light, as he crouched there in the semi-darkness, peering intently in the direction of the two men who sat at their ease but a few steps away, quite oblivious of what was transpiring behind them.

A brief survey seemed to satisfy the masked intruder that they were wholly engrossed in their occupation, and without further delay he emerged from his hiding-place, dropping to the floor again and moving stealthily forward.

In this manner he advanced slowly but surely, inch by inch, until he was close to the unsuspecting Expressmen. Once more he rose to his feet, with ready weapon clutched in either hand, his eyes fairly blazing through the holes in his somber mask as he gloatingly contemplated his victims. The fact that the odds were two to one against him did not daunt the bold marauder in the least. He counted on taking the two men completely by surprise, and in this he was wholly successful.

For an instant the masked man stood like an ebon statue, nerving himself for a mighty effort; then he bounded like a panther upon Roy Noble, bringing that murderous club down upon the head of the latter with all the force of his sinewy right arm.

Without a cry, the luckless messenger sunk unconscious to the floor; and almost simultaneously the desperado covered Tim Tupper with his ready revolver.

That youth was in the middle of an intensely interesting chapter when suddenly interrupted by the appearance of the masked intruder. At sight of the latter, Tim started so violently that the pile of boxes on which he perched was upset, and went to the floor with a terrific crash, with the hapless youth entangled in the debris.

When he freed himself it was to find the unwelcome visitor bending over him, pressing the muzzle of his weapon close to his temple.

"Get up!" was the terse command, and Tim obeyed with alacrity.

The cold touch of the pistol-barrel sent a shiver down his spine, and caused all his vaunted courage to disappear like magic. He stood before his captor, the very picture of meekness and submission.

"I want you to help me a little, my festive youth," said the masked man, grimly. "Obey orders, and your life is safe. Make any attempt at outcry, and I'll blow out your brains quicker'n you can say 'scat.' Understand?"

"I reckon I've got good ears," retorted Tim, quickly. "What d'ye want me to do, mister?"

"To begin with, open the rear door of this car and admit the gentlemen whom you will find waiting on the platform."

There was no alternative but to obey, and Tim accordingly started for the door without demur, with that grim revolver still on a line with his head.

"Humph! Here's a pretty kettle o' fish," mumbled the youth to himself, as he reluctantly proceeded to unlock the massive door.

"Where in thunder did this feller drop from, an' what are these other chaps waitin' outside for? I reckon I kin see through the hull game. It's a bold move for that hundred thousand. Waal, I reckon I'm fairly caught this time, so I might as well obey orders an' so save my precious neck. Here goes!"

As the door swung open, three stalwart fellows, who had been crouching low upon the

platform, bounded into the car with such suddenness as to nearly upset Tim Tupper, who was rather slow in getting out of the way. They were rough, burly fellows, armed, and though without masks the thick bushy beards they wore were quite as effective in concealing their features.

The trio glided in without a word, and stood mutely awaiting the pleasure of the slender youth in black who seemed to be their leader, and who greeted their appearance with an approving nod.

"Good enough, boys! You're right on hand, as usual," he complimented. "Now, young feller, close and lock that door again, and be quick about it! That's right! Now, march forward to where your festive friend is lying."

Tim Tupper obeyed these instructions promptly, for that grim revolver still looked him in the face with a persuasive power that was irresistible.

Meantime, Roy Noble lay where the ruthless hand of the assailant had felled him, quite unconscious yet, but breathing heavily. It was apparently but the question of a few minutes when he would regain his senses.

"Get some rope, boys, and tie this critter hand and foot, for I opine he will soon come to, and he may be inclined to cut up rusty. Also, supply a gag to prevent any unnecessary noise on his part."

While this was being done, the masked leader coolly turned his attention to the huge safe that occupied one end of the car. On account of the frequency with which the messenger must of necessity visit the safe during his long trip, the massive outside doors bearing the combination lock were always left ajar; therefore, nothing but the inner door stood between the robbers and their prospective booty. All this was noted by the man in the mask with the utmost satisfaction.

"Good plain sailing. No pesky combinations to monkey with," he commented, with a chuckle. "Now, young man, where do you keep the keys that open that door?"

"I dunno nothin' about the safe, mister," was Tim's dogged answer.

"Humph! You don't, eh? See if this will help you to remember a little something about it," and the robber's weapon suddenly shot forward until the steely tube fairly touched Tim's nose, giving that worthy a violent start. "No monkey bizness with me, young fellow! Where are the keys? Out with it, quick, or off goes your head!"

This startling demonstration had its desired effect.

"I—I—I guess you'll find 'em in the messenger's pocket," faltered the victim in blank despair.

"Produce them and then unlock that door!" was the next order, delivered in harsh, unyielding tones.

Mentally cursing the ill-luck that had led him into this awkward scrape, Tim Tupper reluctantly obeyed. The doors swung slowly open, and the coveted treasures of the vault were revealed to the avaricious eyes of the marauders.

"Now, boys," cried the leader, "let's settle down to business. The boodle is before us, but we must work lively if we would get away with it in safety, for our time is limited. You, Jack, keep this fellow covered, and shoot him at the first sign of treachery. No, don't bother to tie him up, for I shall want to use him again presently. Now, the rest of you work with me."

Acting under the black mask's instructions, the lawless plunderers went immediately to work. Their first act was to drag forth the long pine box, by means of which their leader had so shrewdly gained entrance to the Express-car. Then began the work of transferring the many valuable packages from the safe to the box, which was sufficiently commodious to contain them all.

This nefarious work had not continued long, however, before the plunderers were interrupted. The train suddenly slackened speed; and Tim Tupper's face brightened considerably when he noted this fact, for he knew they were approaching a station, and felt there was still a chance of outwitting the robbers.

But, while the masked leader was equally quick to comprehend the situation, he gave no visible symptoms of uneasiness. Coolly turning to the Expressman, he demanded:

"What station is this we are approaching?"

"Silver Valley, I reckon."

"Any Express matter to be left there?"

"Yes; and probable some to be taken."

"Well, we won't interfere with your regular duties at all, laughed the marauder. "You

may proceed to receive and deliver in the usual manner, just as though nothing had happened. We won't interrupt you."

Tim could hardly conceal his surprise. What did the robber mean? Was the latter foolish enough to invite his own destruction by allowing him an opportunity to escape, and give the alarm? The youth's heart thumped hard and fast at the thought.

But while he stood ruminating thus, the four plunderers were not idle. They lifted the still unconscious Express messenger, and bore him to the furthest corner, where, behind a pile of merchandise, he was safe from observation. Then the half-filled plunder-box was also hurriedly concealed.

"Now," said the grim leader, addressing Tim Tupper, "we are all ready to transact the company's bizness. We will take up positions behind these boxes, where we can see and yet be unseen. You will perform your necessary duties as promptly as possible, with the knowledge that we are watching you closely, prepared to frustrate any attempt at treachery. Bear in mind that four trusty weapons will cover you, backed by men who never miss their aim, and, if by word or sign you attempt to betray us, you will fall, riddled by bullets, the next instant. Do you comprehend?"

"I reckon I do, mister."

"Good! Now, open the door and proceed to business."

Tim obeyed, for the train had now come to a standstill at the Silver Valley Station, where, despite the lateness of the hour, quite a crowd had assembled. There were among them a number of bold, well-armed men, who would have liked nothing better than an outlaw-hunt, and it needed but a knowledge of their presence to bring a formidable party down upon the audacious scoundrels who lurked within the Express-car.

Truly, it was a desperate game that the latter were playing, and its success or failure depended upon Tim Tupper.

That youth mechanically handed out all matter consigned to Silver Valley, and received the few packages thrown in at the door; but, while thus manually employed, his mental faculties were also busily at work. However, Tim was not an over-courageous lad, and the result of his mental struggle proved him to be unequal to the trying occasion.

Conscious that four glittering pistol-barrels were focused on his head, and doubting not that the first hostile movement on his part would result in instant death, it is perhaps hardly to be wondered at that the young man hesitated ere inviting such a fate. Great as was his desire to perform his duty and give an alarm, his self-perservative instinct was stronger, and, as he stood thus undecided, the train moved on again and the opportunity was lost.

"Young fellow you're a trump!" gleefully cried the robber leader, emerging from his concealment when the station was left behind and the car closed once more. "I calculated you'd value your life too highly to make any false breaks, and I see I gauged your character just right. What you lack in courage is made up in common-sense. I'd like to give you a place in my land."

"That honor is declined, an' no thanks to ye for the offer," returned Tim, dryly. "I don't keer about associatin' with sich people, an' the sooner ye finish up yer dirty work here an' clear out, the better I shall like it."

"Ha, ha! Well spoken, my boy," laughed the masked leader. "We'll soon rid you of our unwelcome presence, never fear. Let's see, the next stopping-place is Branford, is it not?"

"You are right."

"How far away?"

"A matter of ten miles or thereabouts."

"Good! our work will be completed when we reach there. Come, boys, settle down to business again."

The work of transferring the contents of the safe, interrupted by the stop at Silver Valley, was now resumed and pushed to completion. The secret door of the treasure-box was then closed, and the four Express-robbers calmly rested from their labors.

A few minutes afterward the train slackened speed at Branford.

"Here we are! Now, my young friend, be so kind as to hand out all goods consigned to this station, not forgetting this valuable box which is marked 'John Thomas, Branford,' and is supposed to contain the body of 'poor brother Bill.' Ha, ha, ha!"

It was with very ill grace that Tim carried out the instructions of his captor, but those

death-dealing six-shooters at his back again exerted their persuasive powers; and when the train moved on again, that long pine box, with its valuable contents, lay on the depot platform at Branford.

"Now, then, the box has gone, and we must follow to look after our treasure," said the chief robber, hurriedly. "Accept my sincere thanks, young man, for the valuable aid you have rendered, and be assured we shall never forget it. And now, since I have no further need of your services, and as I desire to postpone the discovery of this affair as long as possible, I'll take the liberty to have you bound and gagged and placed beside your friend yonder."

This was speedily done, and then, while the train was still running at but a moderate rate of speed, the four successful Express-robbers leaped one by one from the open door and disappeared in the gloom.

CHAPTER III.

VAIN PURSUIT.

THUS was consummated a robbery that, for shrewdness of plot and boldness of execution, stood without a parallel in Western railway history; and, as the train rolled rapidly onward, the luckless fellows who had so easily fallen victims to this daring scheme, bound and gagged as they were, could but commune with their own unpleasant reflections, utterly powerless to prevent the escape of the audacious thieves with their plunder.

However, they were not destined to long remain in that disagreeable position. At the very next stopping-place, a dozen miles beyond the point where the four marauders decamped, the suspicions of the station people were aroused by the messenger's non-appearance, and the side door of the car being wide open, they immediately entered to investigate.

Of course the plight of the two Expressmen was quickly discovered, and as soon as released they told their startling story.

The news of the robbery created a great sensation, as may well be imagined. Trainmen and passengers, together with a considerable number of townspeople who chanced to be at the station, now gathered in an excited throng, eagerly discussing the situation.

"Now, there's still a slight chance left to thwart the robbers, if we act immediately," cried Roy Noble, with difficulty making himself heard above the Babel of voices.

"Advise the agent at Branford of the situation instantly! The box containing the booty was left in his care, and if the rascals have not already secured it, he may be able to preserve it from their clutches."

This advice was well worth acting upon, and a rush was instantly made for the operator. In a moment the magic key was making merry music, as it fairly flew beneath his nimble fingers.

In breathless suspense the crowd awaited a reply, but, to their increasing surprise and disappointment, none was forthcoming.

Despite his repeated calls for Branford, that station made no answer; and finally the operator abandoned the attempt in disgust.

"No use, gentlemen; can't get 'em!" he announced. "There is something wrong on the line. Probably the wires are cut."

Then Tim Tupper declared that he had seen a pair of linemen's spurs protruding from the pocket of one of the men who had entered the Express-car, and this fact went far to strengthen the operator's theory.

The cunning brain that planned this stupendous robbery had seemingly provided for every possible exigency; and, without doubt, the very first act of the gang after leaving the car had been to climb the nearest telegraph-pole and sever the wires, thus effectually shutting off all communication between Branford and the West.

For the present, at least, the robbers were masters of the situation. The country thereabouts was wild and sparsely inhabited, while the settlements were small and far apart.

The nearest place where adequate assistance could be obtained was at Richville, the western terminus of the route, now over two hours' run distant. To proceed to the latter place as quickly as possible seemed the wisest course, and this was accordingly done.

Arriving at Richville an alarm was at once given, and, though the hour was late, and the majority of the citizens wrapt in slumber, the news spread with marvelous rapidity. The authorities were thoroughly aroused, and determined upon prompt and energetic action; and in a comparatively short time a strong sheriff's posse had been organized, and was on the way to the scene of action aboard a special train.

It was scarcely daylight when the party reached the quiet little community of Branford. The station agent was immediately sought out, and roused from his downy couch. He appeared at the door in response to their imperative summons, sleepily rubbing his eyes, and astonished beyond measure at the appearance of these early morning visitors.

From him it was learned that an old man had driven up to the depot in a stout wagon, drawn by a single horse, perhaps half an hour before the arrival of the train. In conversation with the agent, the stranger gave his name as John Thomas, claiming to reside in the back districts a dozen miles from town, and stating that he had come for the body of his son, Bill, who had just died in Grandon, and whose body was to be sent home that night for burial. Though the man was a perfect stranger to him, the agent had no reason to suspect anything wrong in his presence, and when the train arrived and the long box, plainly addressed to John Thomas, was carefully handed out, he at once turned it over to its supposed owner. No sooner was the box safely deposited in the wagon than the stranger, remarking that he had a long journey ahead of him, whipped up his horse and quickly disappeared.

Here, then, was fresh evidence of the marvelously cunning manner in which the Express robbery had been planned and executed. Clearly, no ordinary thief was at the head of this gang, but a master hand at villainy, to capture whom would require no small amount of strategy.

After obtaining a minute description of the man who secured the box, together with the direction taken by him, the sheriff's party pushed on, leaving the agent fairly overwhelmed with chagrin and astonishment at the knowledge that a gigantic robbery had been committed, and the valuable booty carried away before his eyes in the very box he had handled so gingerly under the impression that it contained a corpse.

For a mile or two it was an easy matter to trace the course of the robber's team; but soon the road merged into a broader and more frequented thoroughfare, and then the troubles of the outlaw-hunters began. For here the hoof and wheel marks were so plentiful that to follow any particular carriage by this means was an utter impossibility. The sheriff's party soon realized this fact, and wisely abandoned the attempt.

There were other resources left, however, and the search was prosecuted as vigorously as circumstances would allow. But luck was decidedly against the man-hunters. Constant inquiry failed to reveal any person who had seen the man with the box, or, indeed, any other strangers who might be associated with the robbery. The gang had doubtless put many a mile behind them before daybreak, and no man knew whither they had flown. After spending the entire day in fruitless search, the party returned to Richville baffled and discouraged.

Meantime, the news of the robbery had spread like wildfire, and the entire community was wrought to the highest pitch of excitement; for, while deeds of crime and violence were by no means infrequent along this line, running as it did through a wild and half-civilized section of the West, this latest exploit fairly eclipsed all previous performances of the kind.

In the thriving town of Richville the excitement was particularly intense. The daily newspapers came out with great flaring headlines, giving highly-colored descriptions of the affair. People neglected their business, and congregated upon the streets to talk about the audacious robbery, which now became the sole topic of conversation.

The detailed statement of the Express-messenger, published by the papers, was eagerly read and discussed. Some believed the story implicitly, while others were inclined to reject it as being highly improbable and quite unworthy of belief. That yarn about the box with a secret door and a robber concealed within was, they declared, quite too transparent to deceive intelligent people. More likely the messenger and his youthful associate, Tim Tupper, were in league with the robbers, and had deliberately admitted them to the car, if, indeed, they had not actually helped to plunder the safe. It was quite natural that the Expressmen should take every possible precaution to conceal their own implicacy in the affair, and, therefore, to accomplish that end had caused themselves to be bound and gagged, this together with the cunning man-in-the-box story being well calculated to avert suspicion.

Of course Roy Noble's many friends, knowing well his sterling character, vigorously denounced this story as being quite preposterous and un-

worthy of the slightest attention; nevertheless, there were not a few others inclined to believe otherwise, and the ugly rumors, once put into circulation, spread with marvelous rapidity. It was not long, therefore, before the messenger was made aware of the existing rumors connecting him with the train-robbers; and his feelings on receiving this intelligence can better be imagined than described.

Roy was already sore and discomfited at the ridiculously easy manner in which he had been outwitted by the robbers, and now this new phase in the situation was hardly calculated to soothe his injured feelings. His dismay was increased when, a few hours later, he received a message from the local superintendent of the great Express Company, requesting an immediate interview, and upon reaching the latter's office was coolly informed that, while having the utmost confidence in his integrity, it was deemed best, in view of existing circumstances, to relieve him of further duty until the investigation of the robbery was completed.

Poor Roy! As he emerged from the superintendent's office it was to feel that he was a marked man, cursed by the shadow of suspicion, and he expected at any moment to be seized by the law's minions and hurried away to a prison cell. While the latter event did not take place, it was none the less a fact that his every movement was closely watched, and any attempt at flight, had he been so inclined, would have been speedily frustrated.

It was bad enough to lose the valuable property intrusted to his care; but to be suspected of implicacy in the robbery was more than the sensitive messenger could bear with equanimity. Hosts of sympathetic friends were ready to assist him, however; and, consoled by their cheering words, Roy waited as patiently as possible for the lifting of the cloud of suspicion that now hung threateningly over him.

CHAPTER IV.

HAD MADGE'S MANIFESTO.

ON the second morning after the great Express robbery, an interesting group of individuals might have been found in a certain building belonging to the railroad corporation, and located near the Richville station. The party numbered perhaps half a score, and was composed entirely of railway employees.

The place where they had assembled was a large, hall-like apartment comprising an entire upper floor, and had been fitted up expressly for the use of the company's employees during their moments of leisure. Besides answering the purpose of a reading and smoking room, it was also supplied with the paraphernalia for billiards, gymnastics and other kindred amusements.

It was Superintendent Renwood who had been instrumental in providing this cozy lounging place for the hard-working "boys" on his division. He was ever mindful of the comfort and welfare of his employees, his interest perhaps increased by the knowledge that they were most of them his old-time comrades, for it was but a short time since he had risen from an engineer's cab to the responsible position he now occupied.

It is needless to say that this act of generosity and thoughtfulness on the part of their superintendent was fully appreciated by the gallant railroad boys. There was scarcely an hour in the day that the place was wholly deserted, being resorted to during the periods of enforced idleness between "runs;" while in the evening, when all hands were off duty, one might hunt the whole town over and fail to find a livelier place.

On the present occasion, however, the various means of diversion that usually attracted the "boys" had apparently lost their charm, for all hands gathered in a little group engaged in earnest conversation, the sole topic of which was naturally the recent robbery.

The center of this little knot of railroaders was Headlight Harry, a tall, athletic youth with sparkling blue eyes and wavy auburn hair. The youngest engineer in the company's service, he was second to none in point of skill and reliability, and enjoyed at once the implicit confidence of his employers and the highest esteem of all who knew him. By his side stood his fireman, Rufe Ruffle, a sturdy young fellow whose sterling worth as a bold and fearless railroader had been proved on many a trying occasion.

This pair were fast friends and inseparable companions, off duty as well as on, and together they had figured in innumerable perilous adventures each of which had served to unite them more firmly in the bonds of friendship. This mutual attachment was so obvious that their

associates invariably referred to them collectively as the Railroad Pards.

"The most striking outcome of this robbery," Headlight Harry was saying, "is the manner in which suspicion has been fastened upon Roy Noble. It is astounding to note the rapidity with which this ridiculous rumor has spread, and that it has received such general credence is a fact much to be regretted by his friends. Why, even his employers believe him guilty, if their recent action in temporarily relieving him from duty is to be taken as a criterion."

"It's a 'tarnal shame, that's what it is, to have sich ugly stories floatin' round," broke in Rufe Ruffle, righteously indignant. "Roy Noble should be the last man in the world to be accused of complicity in sich a dirty job. I s'pose the next move 'll be to nab the suspect an' lock him up for safe-keepin'." I should think the authorities would be afraid their bird might unfold his wings an' quietly soar away."

"That would prove a difficult task, I think, should Roy choose to attempt it," declared the engineer, with a knowing smile. "It may not be generally understood, but is nevertheless true, that while the police have not seen fit to arrest the object of suspicion, yet his every movement is closely spied upon, and should he make an effort to leave town it would be to find his intentions neatly frustrated. Such precautions are quite unnecessary, however, for Roy Noble is not the coward to seek safety in flight, when he is perfectly innocent of any wrong-doing."

"Now you're just a-talkin', pard!" cried the irrepressible Rufe. "Roy is goin' to face the music like a man, an' there's plenty of us that'll stan' by him until his innocence is demonstrated to the satisfaction of all concerned. Us railroaders are his friends, ev'ry man Jack of us an' we're a-goin' to stick to him through thick an' thin. Ain't that so, boys?"

A murmur of approval instantly ran through the room, showing that the young fireman in his uncouth and vigorous language had voiced the sentiments of all present.

"Thank you, gentlemen, for the opinion so emphatically expressed. Believe me, it is gratifying to know that I have still a few true friends left in this hour of trouble when they are needed most."

These words, falling in clear, ringing tones upon the ears of the railroaders, had much the effect of an electric shock, for the entrance of the speaker had been quite noiseless, and until this moment none were aware that the subject of their conversation was standing in the open doorway, quietly listening to all that was said.

The Express-messenger now advanced, to be instantly surrounded by the surprised railroad boys, all eager to grasp his hand. He looked a perfect picture of health and strength as he stood there in their midst, and from the smile that wreathed his handsome face, no one would take him for a man under the dread shadow of suspicion.

"Well, boys," he exclaimed, "there is an old saw that asserts that 'the listener never hears aught good of himself,' but for once I am inclined to dispute the truth of that time-honored saying. Once more, my friends, permit me to thank you for your expressions of sympathy; and, in return, I have to offer a bit of news which I feel sure will be welcome."

"About the robbery?" questioned everybody, in an eager chorus.

Roy smilingly nodded in the affirmative as he threw himself into a vacant seat, and displayed a newspaper still damp from the press.

"It's quite a story that the morning papers give us; they're selling like hot cakes on the streets. You see, the perpetrators of the robbery have communicated with President Melrose, very considerably revealing their identity and explaining why the crime was committed; also, hinting that other similar exploits may be expected in the near future. In fact, these miscreants propose to inaugurate a veritable reign of outlawry and crime, if their own boastful statement is to be relied upon."

"Very bold of them, not to say indiscreet, to publish their intentions in advance," declared Headlight Harry. "But, go on with your revelation. How was this communication received?"

"In rather an unusual manner, I should say. I was making a call at Mr. Melrose's house last evening, and, while we were all cozily seated in the parlor, our tranquillity was suddenly disturbed by a ring at the bell so violent as to bring us all to our feet in dismay. The servant who answered the bell was just in time to see a horseman ride down the graveled path like mad and disappear in the gloom. A small package addressed to President Melrose was found upon

the steps where it had been placed by the mysterious messenger; and, upon opening the same, a most curious and interesting document was disclosed.

"It comprised several sheets of brown wrapping paper, each covered with writing in the same bold, irregular hand as the superscription. From the appearance of this wonderful epistle, it's my opinion that the author used a sharpened stick for a pen, and in lieu of ink utilized the juice of some wild berry. Be that as it may, it took us fully two hours to decipher the communication and make a copy of it for future use.

"I'd like to show you the document, but Mr. Melrose has locked it up, and declares his intention to preserve it as a chirographic curiosity. However, the daily papers were favored with a copy, and here we have the interesting epistle *verbatim et literatim*. Listen!"

All hands gathered closer in a state of eager expectancy as Roy Noble leisurely unfolded his newspaper and read:

"MAURICE MELROSE, ESQ.,

President, R. & S. R. R. Co.:—
"DEAR SIR:—As this communication greatly concerns the corporation of which you are chief cook and high-cockorum, the writer takes the liberty of inviting your personal attention to the same, feeling that you cannot fail to become deeply interested in its contents. As a starter, I desire to inform you in particular and the public in general that mine was the brain that planned the recent Express robbery which has created such a hubbub in your lively town, and under my personal guidance was that plot brought to a successful culmination. As a direct result of our enterprise, we are to-day something over a hundred thousand dollars richer in cold cash, not to mention a quantity of watches and other trifles, for all of which we are duly thankful. And right here let me say, in behalf of those who, as I understand, are suspected of complicity in the affair, that we received no aid whatsoever from that source; and the reason why the Expressmen made no resistance is simply because we gave them no opportunity for so doing. You see, I object to sharing the glory of this achievement which rightfully belongs to me alone.

"To proceed, Maurice Melrose, I must tell you who I am and what I propose to do, and, if the latter doesn't startle you, then I'm n' Yankee at guessing. Do you recall the name of Nick Norman? Do you remember the man who was once an humble employee of the great corporation whose head you have the honor of being? who was thrown into a prison cell for some trivial offense? who escaped and, accompanied by his faithful daughter, sought shelter in the wilderness, only to be hounded from place to place and finally brought to death at the ruthless hands of your own bloodthirsty minions? Of course you remember, Maurice Melrose! The circumstances are yet fresh in your memory, I'll warrant. Know, then, that I am Madge Norman the daughter of the man so mercilessly hurtled down by his enemies—that daughter who was faithful to her father till the last, and who is now prepared to avenge his wrongs!

"Doubtless you will recollect that when my father was killed, I made my escape from the gang that wrought his destruction by hiding in the forest. They scoured the country in every direction, but I fooled them all. Ha, ha! In the year or more that has elapsed since that time I have not been idle. I have worked indefatigably with but one object in view—to acquire a position where I could strike to avenge my father. One by one my men were selected, many of them old friends and comrades of Nick Norman, and every one bold, determined fellows, until now I can boast of a powerful band, ready at all times to do my bidding.

"Already we have struck the first blow for vengeance. The recent plundering of the Express will serve to illustrate what we are capable of doing; but that exploit is by no means a circumstance to what is bound to follow. With my powerful force, I propose to inaugurate a veritable reign of terror all along your line. Trains shall be wrecked, passengers robbed, property destroyed—in short, there shall be no limit to my persecution. And when the story of our doings shall have spread broadcast, when timid travelers will no longer intrust their precious lives to your care, and shippers of freight object to consign their property to probable destruction; when traffic is suspended along the entire line and a once powerful corporation swept over the verge of irretrievable ruin—then, I say, and not till then, shall I deem my work of vengeance complete! "Laugh, if you will, at this warning, Maurice Melrose, and call it an idle threat. It is for the future to show how thoroughly I am in earnest. Ere many days have elapsed, you will feel the full weight of a woman's vengeance, and look in mingled terror and amazement upon the destructive career of

"MAD MADGE."

Such was the remarkable effusion that Roy Noble read to his interested hearers, and when he had finished, all stood in open-mouthed astonishment.

"Well, boys, what d'ye think of it?" queried the messenger, at length breaking the silence. "Is it not a choice specimen of epistolary elegance?"

"A very suggestive production, truly, breathing of knives and pistols and dynamite bombs,"

commented Headlight Harry, with a grim smile. "According to the assertions of the author, this railroad is doomed to complete annihilation in the near future. The prospect is exceedingly dubious, to say the least."

"Little need of anticipating so dire a calamity, I reckon," returned Roy, incredulously. "I, for one, am inclined to view the contents of this letter merely as a big bluff. Should this Mad Madge be rash enough to attempt the nefarious business she hints at, I fancy she'll find a bigger task on her fair hands than she bargained for. She will soon run up against a snag, and probably meet the same fate that overtook her esteemed paternal ancestor."

But Headlight Harry gravely shook his head. "I sincerely hope, for the company's sake, that your idea is correct; yet, I fear there is something more than mere bluff in this strange letter from the outlaw's daughter. We have already witnessed a fair specimen of her prowess; and, in my humble opinion, the brain that contrived that cunning Express robbery is fully capable of plotting any amount of mischief. That she has a strong force at her back to execute these schemes is hardly to be doubted. We may expect to see some lively times before long, just mark my words, boys!"

"Let 'er rip, say I!" cried Rufe Ruffle, eagerly. "It 'll seem like old times to have a little fightin' mixed in with our ev'ry-day routine. I swear I'm gettin' rusty for want of a scrimmage. Why, it's be'n more'n a year, hain't it, pard, since we wiped out Nick Norman's gang?"

"Yes, Rufe; considerably more than a year has elapsed since that memorable occasion; though, in truth, it seems but yesterday, so vividly are the events impressed upon my memory. Well do I remember the tragic death of Nick Norman and the mysterious disappearance of his beautiful daughter. And now she as suddenly reappears in the awful role of an avenger. Why, I can scarcely believe that so young and beautiful a woman would launch herself upon a career of violence and crime."

"Yet, such is the case, if we are to credit the misguided girl's own vainglorious statement. I have yet to be convinced that these terrible threats amount to anything more than a colossal bluff. If, however, she undertakes to perform the deeds at which she hints, it will prove, to my satisfaction at least, that she is mentally unbalanced, for surely no sane person would be guilty of such foolhardiness."

"True; it is quite possible that grief for her ill-fated father has driven the poor girl insane. In that event, she merits the sympathy and charity of all. However, we are likely to know the whole truth before long. Meantime, Roy, you may be assured that this letter from the perpetrator of the recent robbery is bound to have one good effect—that of lifting the cloud of suspicion that has hung over you on account of that affair."

"Do you really think so, Harry?" and the messenger's face brightened visibly.

"So sure of it that I extend my congratulations in advance, and—Hello! Bless me, it's nine o'clock and time to be going. Come, Rufus, stir your lazy shanks!"

"It's barely possible you may meet this female avenger," suggested Roy, as the Railroad Pards hurriedly arose to depart. "If so, please extend my best regards, and look out you don't fall in love with her, yourself, for, as everybody knows, Madge Norman is lovely and fascinating as a houri."

"Don't laugh at me in that connection," laughed Headlight Harry, as he hastened from the room. "My heart is already appropriated, you know."

Fifteen minutes later the morning Express moved slowly out of Richville station and entered upon its long eastward run. In the cab of the ponderous iron-horse sat the Railroad Pards, light-hearted and merry as was their wont, neither suspecting that the present trip was destined to add a most exciting chapter to their already eventful history.

CHAPTER V.

THE RAILROAD PARDS IN DIFFICULTY.

THE Railroad Pards bore the enviable reputation of being the best, as well as youngest, engine crew in the employ of the great R. & S. R. R. Co., and consequently were favored with a regular run on one of the most important trains. Leaving Richville at 9:15 A. M., they conducted the Fast Express east as far as Grandon; then, after a short wait at the latter point, returned with the western Mail-and-Express that reached Richville early in the evening.

Day after day, week in and week out, was

this service repeated with never-varying regularity, until the pards had become thoroughly acquainted with every mile of track over which their daily run extended. Indeed, Headlight Harry was wont to laughingly boast that there was not even a tree or post along the entire line that had not become familiar to him from frequent observation.

Yet, despite their perfect knowledge of the road, one might have imagined this to be their maiden trip, such was the remarkable care and vigilance displayed by the youthful pair who piloted the Fast Express. This extra precaution on their part was directly attributable to that remarkable epistle bearing the signature of "Mad Madge"; for, while the vague threats embodied in the contents of that communication were generally regarded as a huge bluff, and nothing more, the Railroad Pards were united in viewing the matter in a far more serious light.

With a past experience fraught with innumerable adventures with robbers, wreckers and others of like ilk, whose evil machinations go to increase ten-fold the dangers and difficulties of the luckless railroader's life, they had learned, among other valuable bits of wisdom, that a little extra precaution, while costing nothing, is frequently the means of averting serious trouble. Therefore, with visions of displaced rails, open switches and the like constantly flashing before his mind, Headlight Harry, while running between stations, never for an instant allowed his eager gaze to wander from the converging lines of steel that glistened so brightly in the morning sunlight.

The outward run to Grandon was made without the occurrence of anything unusual; but this fact did not serve to abate one particle the vigilance of the Pards when, in due course of time, they found themselves well launched upon the return trip. Rather, their apprehensions increased with the approach of nightfall, realizing as they did the increased opportunities for mischief afforded under cover of darkness.

And that their feelings of uneasiness were by no means groundless was fully proved by subsequent events. Peril most imminent at that moment hung threateningly over the Railroad Pards, both the nature of which and the direction whence it came were alike quite unexpected.

As night fell upon the scene, great somber banks of clouds rolled rapidly up from the West—grim harbingers of a coming storm—quite eclipsing Heaven's luminaries; and soon the landscape was shrouded in inky darkness, relieved only by the fitful flashes emitted by the locomotive, rushing like some huge flame-breathing monster on its impetuous way. It was a night well-fitted for deeds of violence and crime, and this fact served to sharpen the senses of the wide-awake railroad boys, who, cognizant of the tremendous responsibility resting upon them, were fully resolved that no lack of vigilance on their part should prevent the train from reaching its destination in safety.

But, alas! for the Railroad Pards, apprehensive though they were of coming evil, and ever on the alert to discover and avert it, yet Fate had designed their well-directed efforts to be of no avail.

As the train moved slowly out of a small station, shortly after nightfall, four shadowy forms might have been seen to dart from their places of concealment, two on either side of the track, and, with a series of agile and noiseless movements, gain the front platform of the foremost car, where they crouched unobserved while the train gradually gathered speed.

Who were these nocturnal prowlers, and why their mysterious movements? Tramps, perhaps, bent on securing free passage, who had selected the "blind" end of the Express-car as being the place least liable to visitation from the argus-eyed ticket-puncher. Yet, the subsequent maneuvers of the four unknowns would seem to indicate a far different object.

No sooner was the station left well behind than those mysterious forms on the front platform became suddenly possessed of renewed activity. One after another they crossed to the end of the tender, and mounted stealthily to the top. Here they paused again, as though apprehensive that their movements had been observed.

But no; the men in the cab were too thoroughly engrossed in their duties to heed these silent movements in their rear. Headlight Harry was leaning far forward in his seat, one ready hand upon the throttle-lever, straining his eager eyes to pierce the gloom; while Rufe Ruffle, having just replenished the seething fires of the iron horse, was keeping an equally

vigilant lookout. Alas! for the Railroad Pards! While watching for an imaginary danger ahead, they failed to discover the veritable peril that threatened from behind, which is scarcely to be marveled at, considering the totally unexpected quarter from whence it came.

Once more the four unknowns were in motion, creeping stealthily over the huge pile of fuel that filled the tender to repletion. While to pass over this yielding mass entirely without noise was quite an impossibility, yet the slight sounds actually made were drowned by the clatter of the speeding train; and the prowlers, advancing inch by inch, soon reached a position almost within reach of their intended victims.

One backward glance would have warned the Pards of their danger, and perhaps afforded an opportunity to avert the fatal consequences; but Fate destined otherwise, and the luckless fellows, quite unconscious of the impending disaster, sat with their gaze riveted upon the track ahead, until—

There was a sudden rush of heavy feet, as four ruffians bounded into the cab, and attacked their victims with the fierceness of jungle tigers. A fearful blow upon the head sent Headlight Harry senseless to the floor; but Rufe Ruffle was not disposed of quite so easily. Chancing to turn his head at that moment, a blow savage enough to have split his skull was narrowly averted, and, with a cry of defiance, the intrepid fireman instantly grappled with his assailants. So unequal a contest, however, with odds four to one, could have but one result; and in far less time than it takes to record the fact, Rufe found himself bound, gagged and helpless, though physically none the worse for the brief encounter.

As he lay upon the rough floor, close beside his senseless pard, vaguely conscious of the fact that their pet engine was in the hands of a gang of masked ruffians, the face of the vanquished fireman was a study. Astonishment, disgust and anger were ludicrously blended.

The four marauders proceeded with a promptitude that showed the details of their scheme to be carefully prearranged. Two of their number immediately took the posts recently occupied by the engine crew, while their companions, after unceremoniously dragging the luckless victims back into the tender, themselves took up a crouching position beside them. Thus, if any person had chanced to look into the cab from the rear, there was nothing visible to arouse suspicion, for, in the indistinct light, the two unknowns who perched so coolly in their lofty seats might easily have been mistaken for the *bona fide* engineer and fireman.

On rushed the long train upon its way, with all on board quite ignorant of the change that had taken place within the locomotive cab, and, ten minutes after the capture of the Railroad Pards, the next stopping-place was approached. Then it was that the bold marauders prepared for the next move in their desperate game.

As the huge driving-wheels ceased to revolve, the pair who had hitherto crouched in the background now leaped lightly from the cab on the side opposite to that on which the station was located. Their comrades quickly raised the form of the still unconscious engineer, and lowered it into the arms that waited to receive it. An instant later, captors and captive disappeared within the dense bushes that skirted the track.

That this bold move was accomplished without detection was due to a combination of favorable circumstances. The place was a small one, and but few people were about the station at the time, all of them being assembled upon the platform to meet the incoming train. Then, too, the pseudo-engineer had planned to stop at a point fully two car-lengths beyond the lighted depot, where there was nothing to relieve the intense blackness of the night. With the train-hands all engaged in their duties at the station, it is scarcely to be wondered at that the mysterious marauders accomplished their purpose without discovery.

Once more the train moved on, with the two remaining unknowns still at their self-appointed posts. Their part in this strange night's work yet remained unfinished. The cool and efficient manner in which they managed the great iron-horse, was evidence of past experience at the lever and throttle.

Several stations were passed, one after another, but they stuck tenaciously to the cab until a point was reached fully twenty miles beyond the scene of Headlight Harry's abduction. Here it was evident they were about to relinquish the role which they had enacted with such good effect.

As the train again came to a stop, one of the

unknown bent over Rufe Ruffle, who had remained a dumb but interested witness of the entire proceedings, and loosened the cords that bound him so that it would require but a few moments effort on the fireman's part to free himself entirely. Scarcely had this been done when the swing of the conductor's red-light set the train again in motion, and, a moment later, the two ruffians leaped nimbly to the ground, leaving Rufe Ruffle, bound and gagged, the sole occupant of the locomotive cab.

Ten minutes later these same individuals might have been seen riding briskly over a rough country road, in the direction of the distant foot-hills, mounted on mettlesome steeds, and accompanied by a third desperado, to whom they were gleefully recounting their successful night's adventures.

Meantime, Rufe Ruffle had lost no time in improving his opportunity. Working energetically at the bonds so considerably loosened by his late captors, he soon had the satisfaction of finding himself at liberty.

His first act was to bring the train to a standstill; then, as the train-hands rushed excitedly forward to learn the cause of this action, he quickly explained what had occurred on the engine during that eventful trip.

To say that his story caused a sensation is putting it but mildly. All stood aghast as they realized the audacious scheme that had been brought to a successful culmination beneath their very noses. A brief consultation was held, and the impossibility of succoring the unfortunate engineer at the present time was speedily demonstrated. To push on to Richville and notify the authorities seemed the most sensible procedure under the circumstances, and this was accordingly done without further delay.

The news of Headlight Harry's mysterious abduction spread like wildfire, furnishing a new theme for conversation, and promising to create an even greater sensation than the famous Express robbery that had but recently set the community agog with excitement.

CHAPTER VI.

THE UNDERGROUND CHAMBER.

SECURE from observation in their leafy covert, the captors of Headlight Harry remained until the fast receding train had vanished in the distance. Then, lifting the still unconscious engineer between them, they emerged from the thicket and moved noiselessly across an adjacent field.

The night marauders had evinced great shrewdness in selecting this small and unimportant station as a fitting place to escape from the engine with their victim. Houses were few and far between, and it was quite an easy matter to elude the mere handful of people who chanced to be in the immediate vicinity.

Traversing the field, they soon reached a narrow highway at a point not far distant from the railroad. Pausing here, one of the ruffians gave a low, peculiar whistle which was instantly returned, while from the dense thicket that fringed the road a dusky form emerged.

"Hello, Pat! Is it you?" was the cautious salutation.

"Faith, an' it's me own silf, an' nobody's else," came the ready response, in accents unmistakably Milesian. "Shure, an' it's tired enough I am, a-waitin' fer yez. Did yez fetch the spalpeen along?"

"Use yer eyes more an' yer tongue less, an' ye'll see the bloomin' beauty right here under yer nose. I reckon Black John is not the galoot to trip up on an easy job like this, but he brings down his game ev'ry time. Eh, pard?"

"Right you are, pard," rejoined the third unknown. "An' I'll allow the cap'n'll be mighty tickled when we bring the critter in safe an' sound."

"An' by the shades of Holy St. Patrick, phat does the cap'n want o' this bloody spalpeen of an engineer? Shure, she's taken pains enough to git him, but phat the divil it's all about is more than I can tell."

"And the same is none of our bizness, Pat, me boy," tersely returned the individual called Black John. "It's our duty to obey orders an' ask no questions. So, cease your blarney an' trot out those bosses. We've got a long, hard ride ahead of us."

The Irishman thereupon quickly subsided, and proceeded to lead three powerful steeds from the thicket where they had been tethered. The trio quickly mounted, Headlight Harry being thrown unceremoniously across the pommel of Black John's saddle; in which uncomfortable position he was sustained by the stout arm of that redoubtable ruffian. Without further conversation, the mysterious night-riders now

moved briskly along the winding country road toward the rugged hills that loomed up in the distance.

They followed this highway for several miles, then branched off into a narrow path that wound its serpentine course up the rugged mountain-side, along this tortuous path the little party slowly and laboriously wended their way, until at length the passage became so narrow that it was found necessary to dismount. Leaving the horses in charge of one of their number, the others pressed forward on foot, bearing their captive between them, forcing their way with extreme difficulty through the maze of bushes and briars that choked the path and rendered it well-nigh impassable.

Headlight Harry was handled with as scant ceremony as though he was but a sack of meal, instead of a human being with flesh susceptible to the tenacious clutch of thorns and briars; yet, the poor fellow was providentially spared all consciousness of the rough usage to which he was now subjected, for that blow that laid him senseless was a most terrific one, and he had not yet recovered from its terrible effects.

And when he finally did regain his senses, it was to find himself amid far different surroundings—no longer roughly borne through the chill night air, but lying peacefully upon a comfortable couch of furs within a commodious apartment. Dazed and bewildered, it was some time before he could recollect his scattered wits sufficiently to grasp the situation. Without attempting to change his recumbent position, he allowed his curious gaze to wander over the range of vision, mentally noting the various objects that presented themselves to view.

That he was now within a subterranean chamber was evident at a glance. The walls and floor were of stone, smooth as though polished by human hands, while from the roof, fully twenty feet above his head, thousands of glittering stalactites hung pendent, presenting a most beautiful appearance in the soft light that pervaded the place.

The walls were hung with skins of various animals, while the floor was thickly carpeted with the same material, this going far to impart a warm and cozy look to the otherwise bare rock-chamber. The room was but sparsely furnished, containing a plain deal table, two chairs, a chest and a variety of miscellaneous articles quite needless to enumerate. On one side the wall of skins took the form of a heavy curtain, suspended from a stout rope that stretched across the cavern, there being a space of several feet between the top of this and the rocky roof, showing that the apartment thus formed was but a small portion of the whole.

All this Headlight Harry was enabled to see by the mellow light of two lamps that hung in brackets attached to the wall; and to say that he was surprised thereat is giving but a faint expression to his actual feelings.

From the cab of a speeding locomotive to this mysterious underground chamber was, indeed, a wonderful transition; and it's hardly to be marvelled at that the bewildered engineer should for fully ten minutes lie motionless on the couch, vaguely staring about the room, and striving to get his confused brain into working order.

Finally, he struggled to a sitting posture, still faint and dizzy from the fearful blow he had received, and with his aching head clasped between his hands, lapsed into a soliloquy that soon found audible expression.

"What manner of enchantment is this? Am I in the realm of fairies and hobgoblins, or am I still an upright citizen of the good old United States of America? I should certainly swear I had a severe dose of the nightmare, were it not for this infernal headache, which furnishes most convincing proof that I am wide-awake. Now, let's see, what can I remember? Oh, yes, it's all clear enough, now! I was sitting in my seat on old Number Six, just out of Zippsville, when suddenly I got a clip on the noddle-box that sent me kiting. And then—and then—I just woke up and found myself here!

"Now, where am I? and what the deuce was I lugged here for in such a mysterious fashion? These are the momentous questions that call for elucidation. It's plain that I'm now in some underground chamber, but whether the same is in the United States or in Old Nick's own dominions I'm quite unable to determine. Judging from appearances, however, I should say that the outer world is not far distant. It's evident, too, that there is another and larger apartment beyond this, the mysteries of which I now propose to explore, there being apparently nobody around to interpose objections to—Hello!"

Just as Headlight Harry was about to rise,

bent on carrying out his purpose, the heavy curtain was abruptly parted, and a villainous, be-whiskered face peered in upon him. Only for an instant, however, for the new-comer almost instantly withdrew.

"I'm not so entirely alone as I fondly imagined," quoth the engineer, dryly. "Reckon I'll go slow, and see what's in the wind."

He had not long to wait, for the fellow soon returned and this time entered the apartment. He bore a tray containing various dishes of edibles, all of which he deliberately proceeded to arrange upon the table. This done, he turned to Headlight Harry, who had watched the operation with appreciative eyes.

"The captain sends regards, an' says as how if ye'r' hungry, now's the time to pitch in an' git a squar' meal. Afterward, prepare to receive a visit from the captain."

"Indeed! Kindly return my compliments to 'the captain,' and say that his kind consideration for the welfare of my inner man is heartily appreciated. Also, please say that I trust he will defer his intended call until I have fully satisfied my appetite, for I dislike most decidedly to be disturbed while at table. And say, my friend, if I may make bold to ask, who the dickens is 'the captain,' anyway, and what particular organization is he captain of?"

But the party addressed abruptly withdrew without vouchsafing the desired information.

"Humph! That pump is dry, I see," muttered the young engineer, and he turned to inspect the repast that now awaited his pleasure. There was an abundance of plain but palatable food, and a bottle of wine with which to wash it down, and to the eyes of the hungry youth the spread was a most appetizing one. Without hesitation he drew up a chair and proceeded to demolish the tempting edibles.

While thus engaged, Headlight Harry found opportunity to ponder well the situation. He had already seen enough to convince him that this was the retreat of some unknown organization; and at once his mind reverted to that ominous letter signed by Mad Madge. That the latter's boasted band was actually in existence he had scarcely a doubt; but could it be possible that he was now in the hidden haunt of that self-styled Queen of Train Wreckers? The thought was a startling one, and served to make Headlight Harry anxious for the coming interview, which would determine beyond a doubt if his surmises were correct.

Finishing his repast, he threw himself back upon the couch and awaited with fast-growing impatience the coming of the expected visitor.

Ten minutes later the curtains suddenly parted, and a lithe form appeared in the opening. Headlight Harry with difficulty suppressed the cry that welled to his lips, for it was, indeed, Mad Madge, Queen of the Train Wreckers, who stood before the astonished young engineer.

CHAPTER VII.

THE OUTLAW QUEEN.

MAD MADGE glided noiselessly into the apartment, her every movement the very personification of ease and grace; and, as she boldly confronted the captive engineer, it was to present the most attractive picture of youth and beauty.

She was of slightly more than medium height, lithe and supple as the willow; and, though apparently still in her teens, possessed all the charms of ripened womanhood.

Her clear, oval face was almost perfect in its beauty, every feature being as clear-cut and regular as though chiseled by a sculptor's master-hand. The ruddy glow of health was on her cheeks, while her sloe-black eyes glistened with wondrous intensity. Her queenly head was crowned by a wealth of lustrous black locks, cut short in boy-fashion, which curled in luxuriant ringlets about a neck of alabaster whiteness.

The Queen's habiliments were those of a man, consisting in part of blue flannel shirt, tastefully embroidered, jacket of somber black with trowsers of the same material, the latter being held in place by a belt of scarlet leather, into which were thrust a brace of glistening six-shooters, these deadly weapons seeming strangely out of place on the person of their girlish and innocent appearing owner. Beaded Indian moccasins incased her feet, while upon her head rested a jaunty cap, ornamented by a handsome eagle's plume. The girl's masculine attire revealed her exquisite figure in all its voluptuous contour, while her entire appearance was bold and dashing in the extreme.

No wonder that Headlight Harry continued to stare in mingled surprise and admiration at this fascinating vision of female loveliness, until

finally recalled to his senses by the voice of his visitor.

"In deference to your expressed wish, I have endeavored to allow you ample time to finish your repast undisturbed. I trust you are now at liberty to grant me an interview."

Mad Madge's voice was clear and resonant as the notes of a silvery bell, and her ripe red lips, parting as she spoke, revealed two dainty rows of teeth of pearly whiteness.

In a measure recovered from the spell into which the advent of the beautiful Outlaw Queen had thrown him, Headlight Harry was immediately on his feet, making his most elaborate bow.

"Let me assure you that, had I been aware of the identity of my intended visitor, I would readily have foregone my repast in order to hasten the interview," he gallantly exclaimed.

"And judging by appearances, I imagine that would have been quite a sacrifice on your part," and, as she spoke, Mad Madge glanced significantly at the table, whereon the half-famished engineer had left very little that was edible.

"I am glad to see that you possess so vigorous an appetite, that being a pretty sure indication that you are feeling no particularly ill effects from your recent trying experience."

"Indeed, Richard is quite himself again, if I may except a slight headache, doubtless super-induced by a gentle love-tap received at the hands of parties at present unknown," and the young engineer ruefully pressed his throbbing temples as he spoke.

Over the girl's fair face flitted a shade of solicitude and pity.

"I am very sorry," she hastened to say, "that my men should have caused you any bodily injury. My instructions were to use the least possible violence; and I shall lose no time in calling the fellows to account for their apparent disobedience."

"Please spare yourself the trouble," returned Headlight Harry, and there was the slightest tinge of irony in his tone. "Of course the fellows, anxious to obey orders to the best of their ability, were forced to resort to extreme measures. Otherwise, it is barely possible that this interesting interview would never have taken place."

"That I do not question, for the great bravery of Headlight Harry, prince of engineers, has been thoroughly demonstrated in the past. However, the lion was caught off his guard at last. Ha, ha, ha!" and Madge's elfin laughter re-echoed loud and clear.

"I am to understand, then, that it is to you that I am indebted for the pleasure of being here to-night?" said the engineer, anxious to get down to business without further waste of time in complimentary phrases.

"You are quite right. I freely admit that I, alone, am responsible for the present situation."

"Humph! It strikes me forcibly that you were exceedingly solicitous for my company, to go to such extraordinary pains to secure it. When a gentleman's presence is particularly desired, it is considered the proper thing to forward a polite note of invitation, this being slightly preferable to unceremoniously knocking a fellow on the head and dragging him off like a lamb to the slaughter."

"That would be a more conventional method, I'll admit; yet, it is to be feared that in this particular instance the result would not have been so highly satisfactory. I preferred to adopt a scheme whereby the unwilling guest would have no opportunity to send his regrets. Ha, ha!"

"Well, admitting that your novel plan succeeded admirably, I would now like to ask the motive for such extraordinary proceedings. It strikes me that, in view of the peculiar circumstances, a full explanation should be immediately forthcoming."

"Which was precisely my object in paying you this early visit," laughed Mad Madge. "Only have a little patience, my friend, and everything shall be thoroughly elucidated."

"The sooner the better, then, for my bump of curiosity is considerably inflamed."

"Well, listen!" commanded the Outlaw Queen, and, drawing up a chair, she gracefully seated herself therein, motioning the engineer to do likewise.

"I'm all attention. Please proceed," exclaimed the latter, eagerly.

"To begin with, then, Headlight Harry, do you know who I am?"

"Quite a needless question, I should say," laughed the youth. "It is easy enough to recognize in you one whom I have known ever since we were happy, romping children together—"

beautiful Margaret Norman, the belle of Richville."

"She who was once Margaret Norman," corrected the maiden, sharply, "but now Mad Madge, the Queen of Train Wreckers!"

"Quite a sensational title, to be sure—"

"And one that is destined to be known throughout the land, one that shall become an emblem of retributive justice, and strike terror to a soulless corporation," cried Mad Madge, her black eyes flashing brightly.

"Listen!" she continued, "and you shall hear what I propose to do. I suppose it is unnecessary to recite the facts relative to the death of my poor father, Nick Norman, something over a year ago. You are already familiar with the circumstances attending that sad event. Driven to outlawry because of merciless persecution for minor offenses—misdeeds that would have been freely condoned in one possessing wealth and influence, he was finally hounded to an ignominious doom, and I, his daughter, left friendless, homeless and alone.

"My father's enemies were mine, and fleeing from them like the fox from the baying hounds, I buried myself in the heart of the virgin forest. Long and persistent were the searches made for me, but I managed to evade them all; and at length the attempt to discover my whereabouts was abandoned, and I was given up for dead. Never were they more mistaken, for at that time I was comfortably ensconced in this hiding-place, laughing at the discomfiture of my foes, and deliberately planning vengeance.

"It was by merest chance that I stumbled upon this underground retreat, after several days spent in wandering aimlessly through the wilderness. It is truly a marvelous place, and, while I have made it my home for over a year, many of its recesses yet remain unexplored. Here I have led a solitary existence, subsisting chiefly on game brought down by my trusty rifle; and here was evolved the scheme for vengeance that is now about to reach a successful culmination.

"From the very first, my sole ambition was to avenge my father's cruel death, and how to devise the means of accomplishing this work was a problem that occupied my thoughts by day and by night. I knew that many of my father's old men were still in the vicinity—bold, faithful fellows who fairly worshiped their chief, and who could be counted upon to join with a will in the work of vengeance. I searched high and low for these men, and finally succeeded in finding the lieutenant of my father's band—Black John, a gallant man and true, who quickly approved my plans and joined in the work of securing recruits. It was tediously slow work at first, but one by one my men were found and pledged, until at length I found myself the proud commander of a splendid band, all brave and reliable fellows, ready and willing to do my slightest bidding. Then it was, and not till then, that I deemed the time ripe for immediate action.

"Within this spacious cavern, which is large enough to quarter a regiment, my band finds a comfortable retreat when free from duty. The entrance to the place is exceedingly difficult of access, and it is doubtful if the enemy ever succeeds in finding it. If discovered, so advantageously are we situated that my well-armed men can hold an army at bay. In short, we are in every way qualified to not only bid defiance to our foes, but to carry the war into Africa, as the saying is, and inaugurate a veritable reign of terror in their midst.

"Already has the work of vengeance commenced, as witness the recent Express robbery that has created such a *furor* throughout the community. Of course, you are quite familiar with the circumstances attending that event."

"And w. o., indeed, is not? An achievement in every way remarkable, evidencing great ingenuity of plot and boldness of execution on the part of the rascally perpetrators," the engineer frankly admitted.

"Many thanks for the compliment," laughed Mad Madge, "for it was my brain, and mine alone, that devised the entire scheme. It was I who so successfully enacted the *role* of a corpse, thus gaining possession of the Express-car, and stripping the same of its valuable contents, with the timely assistance of my confederates. Ha, ha, ha! It was a glorious scheme, and worked like a charm."

"Indeed, your skill and bravery are worthy of a better cause—"

"Bah! What better cause could I have than avenging my father's death? Already have I entered upon the path of vengeance, and I shall follow it in a way to make the guilty quake. Let them beware of the wrath that is to come.

I have already given them fair warning in my communication addressed to the president of the road. Have you seen the proclamation?"

"A copy of it, yes; the morning papers having published the document in full."

"Indeed? May I ask how the news was received at Richville?" inquired Mad Madge, eagerly.

"Generally with incredulity, I think I may truthfully say," returned Headlight Harry, promptly. "The people, with a few exceptions, are inclined to look upon your so-called manifesto as mere bombast, and laugh at the idea of such a chaotic state of affairs as hinted at therein."

Mad Madge was instantly upon her feet, her black eyes burning with an ominous light.

"So they laugh at my threats, do they?" she fiercely cried. "They scoff, even with the evidence of my power before their eyes! Fools! They shall soon feel the weight of my vengeance. Ere another sun has set, the reign of desolation and ruin shall be inaugurated. I swear it."

With her beautiful face suffused with the light of passion, Mad Madge paced to and fro like a caged tigress. Headlight Harry waited in silence, watching with mingled surprise and pity this unmistakable evidence of the tempest that was raging within the bosom of this unfortunate woman.

Finally she resumed her seat, as calm to all outward appearance as before; and there ensued a brief silence, broken at length by the young engineer, who was beginning to grow impatient.

"Well, madam," he commenced, "I have been an attentive listener to your story, and I must say that the same has proved exceedingly interesting. Yet, the main point in view still lacks elucidation; for I have yet to learn wherein my humble self is so particularly concerned in this affair. Surely, you have not brought me here, at so great an expense of time and trouble, merely for the purpose of telling me this."

"You are right, Headlight Harry, I have not," promptly averred the Outlaw Queen. "It is for a far different purpose that I have brought about this interview; and, since you are growing impatient, I will proceed to the point without further deviation. I have dwelt upon past events at such length in order that you may know just how matters stand, and be prepared for what is to follow."

"Well?"

"I see you have not the faintest idea of my purpose."

"No; unless, perhaps, you have picked me out as one of your worst enemies, and have brought me here for the purpose of putting me to death by slow torture at your leisure," hazarded the engineer, with a careless laugh.

"Wrong, most decidedly," the girl declared. Then, drawing her chair a little closer, she fixed her beautiful eyes full upon his face. "Listen, Headlight Harry! The primary reason why I have caused you to become my involuntary guest is simply because—because *I love you!*"

CHAPTER VIII.

MAD MADGE'S WOOING.

HAD Mad Madge suddenly leveled a cocked revolver at his head, and declared her intention of blowing him into smithereens at a moment's notice, Headlight Harry would have faced the music without a tremor; but, when she deliberately declared her love for him, the effect upon the young engineer was highly disastrous.

If the stony floor of the cabin had suddenly rose up and smote him hip and thigh, he could have been scarcely more astounded. He sat there as if petrified, staring in open-mouthed amazement at the beautiful girl before him, hardly believing that he had heard aright.

But when Mad Madge again spoke, after a brief but painful silence, it was to speedily convince him that there was no mistake.

"Yes, Harry, I repeat that I love you! Surprising as this statement may be to you, it is none the less true. And it was to acquaint you with the truth, that I caused you to be borne to this secret cavern among the mountains. Nor is this love of mine a new-born fancy, as you may suppose; but it has existed ever since the time when I was a happy village maid, long ere unfortunate circumstances compelled me to forsake the friends of my childhood, in obedience to the still greater affection due to my outlawed father."

"But, true and unwavering as is my love for you, do not for a moment believe that I would have been driven to this unwomanly declaration for love's sake alone. Another, and even more

powerful passion constantly surging in my breast, with the blood of my murdered father crying out for revenge, has spurred me on to this decisive step. With this insatiate thirst for revenge paramount to everything, I seek only to make my work as rapid and complete as possible. It is my desire to attack the enemy simultaneously all along the line, and to do this successfully requires a large addition to my already extensive force. Therefore, it becomes imperative that I should have a friend and partner—one who will share the duties of captaincy, and join with genuine enthusiasm in this grand work of vengeance. And that position I design for you, Headlight Harry, well knowing that no man on earth is more competent to fill it.

"I have watched with interest your work in the past, noting the marvelous skill and bravery which you have displayed in the face of circumstances that would have appalled most men, outwitting your enemies again and again, and thereby winning a reputation to be justly proud of. And is there any reason why you should not do equally good service under another banner? By bringing your extensive experience and superior executive ability to my aid, the work of vengeance would be facilitated to a marvelous extent. Together, we could map out a plan of action, the consummation of which would bring swift and absolute destruction upon the foe.

"And so, in the desire to make my retributive task more swift and certain, I have sought to obtain the assistance of the man whom I have long secretly adored, and who, I repeat, would never have known my passion but for the grave emergency that demanded it. For I reasoned that, with a full knowledge of the truth, you might be induced to give the indorsement to my proposition that would otherwise be withheld. But for this, the secret of my affection would have ever remained locked within my breast, for I never could have brought myself to reveal it, save in pursuance of the stern, unwavering path of duty. Now, Headlight Harry, you have listened to my proposition—tell me candidly what you think of it?"

There was a wistful look in the dark eyes fixed so intently upon the handsome face of the young engineer, as Mad Madge finally ceased speaking and waited calmly for a reply.

As for Headlight Harry, he had eagerly drank in every word of the girl's impassioned utterance; and to adequately describe his varied emotions would be quite an impossibility. Was it true that this misguided young woman, whose mind was no doubt partially unbalanced by the terrible experience of the past, actually felt the tender regard for him that she had so unhesitatingly expressed? Or was this a cunning move to secure his friendship and assistance by appealing to his susceptible nature, luring him to self-destruction by the profession of a love that was far from being felt?

From the earnest look upon Mad Madge's beautiful countenance, it seemed impossible to believe that she was otherwise than in sober earnest. Be that as it may, however, Headlight Harry found himself longing for some avenue of escape from his embarrassing position. There was no alternative, though, but to face the music like a man; and, after no small amount of hesitation, the engineer contrived to regain the use of his tongue.

"Well, Miss Norman, I—"

"Mad Madge, if you please!" the Queen sharply interrupted. "Did I not tell you that my old name is dead?"

"Very well, then; Mad Madge it shall be! As I was about to say, I have listened attentively to all you have said, and to declare that I am greatly surprised thereat is doing but feeble justice to my feelings. Of all things under the sun, this was the very least to be expected; so, if you arranged to spring a little surprise-party upon me, why, you have succeeded admirably."

"Indeed, your amazement was even greater than I had anticipated," Mad Madge admitted, smiling faintly. "But now, however, I trust you have recovered your usual self-possession sufficiently to give the subject the serious consideration it merits."

"Humph! I'm inclined to look upon the matter as being quite the reverse of serious," declared Headlight Harry, lightly. "Your methods of love-making are, to say the least, unconventional, and remind me of a certain custom said to exist in various barbarian lands. There, when a fellow wants to take unto himself a wife, he mounts his horse and sallies forth until he meets a maid who suits his fancy. The lover then gives chase, and upon overtaking his prize, which he usually succeeds in doing, he bears her off to his tent without so much as saying 'by

your leave,' and the courtship question is settled then and there. Our case is very similar, save that the position of man and maid are exactly reversed. However, as this is leap-year, I suppose you are entitled to all the privileges appertaining thereto."

A flush of annoyance suffused the cheeks of the Outlaw Queen, and she frowned as if in anger. Evidently such apparent levity on the part of her guest had scarcely been anticipated.

"Spare your sarcasm, I plead," she cried, and there was the slightest perceptible tremor in her voice. "This is, indeed, a serious subject to me, and I fail to see why you should view it in so ludicrous a light. Perhaps you may entertain some doubt of my sincerity in the matter, in which case I hasten to assure you that I never was more thoroughly in earnest."

"Indeed, if I have indulged in undue levity, I most humbly crave forgiveness," Headlight Harry hastened to say. "It is true that I entertained doubts of your sincerity, viewing the affair as a huge joke; but since you so earnestly assert otherwise, I will endeavor to meet your proposal with proper seriousness."

"Yes," eagerly.
"It is, indeed, flattering to the vanity of a homely, good-for-nothing rascal like myself to know that he possesses the affection of one so highly blessed with personal charms; and especially so, to hear the pleasing intelligence from the fair lady's own lips. Well might any man, no matter how exalted his station, be proud to possess so beautiful a being for his wife; and yet—"

"And yet—?"
"Much though I appreciate the honor, circumstances oblige me to most emphatically decline."

A look of surprise, disappointment, indignation swept over the face of the Outlaw Queen, as these words, so cold and deliberately uttered, fell from the engineer's lips.

"What! Do you, then, scorn my love? Are you so superior to other men that you can afford to reject what others would risk everything to obtain? Surely you value yourself most highly, Headlight Harry!" she exclaimed, bitterly.

"You misunderstand me, I fear. Personally, I repeat, you are well worthy of any man, while, as for my humble self, I feel as much inferior to you in point of good looks and intellect as the tiniest twinkling star is to the glorious God of Day. However, there are material reasons why I must decline to look with favor upon your proposition; and the same shall be speedily elucidated, with your kind permission."

"Please proceed; for I am ready and anxious to hear."

"Well, to commence with, the conditions imposed by you as the price of your hand are decidedly objectionable. Your husband-to-be must join in your career of outlawry, abandoning his former humdrum but honest life for the wild, crime-stained existence of a mountain bandit, and eventually bringing up at the end of the hangman's rope. Oh, no! Such a life is altogether too rapid for an easy, slow-going chap like myself; therefore, I must respectfully decline."

"So, then, you have no sympathy with my cause—no love, no pity, no desire to aid a poor, helpless woman, who is striving with all her power to avenge a fearful wrong! The fact that I am engaged in the fulfillment of a solemn duty rises like an insurmountable barrier between us. But I will not be deterred from my set purpose. Strong though is my affection for you, it pales before the filial love I bear to my poor father; so do not, I beseech you, seek to swerve me from my work of vengeance."

"Such is not my intention, truly," declared Headlight Harry, quickly. "You are mistaken if you suppose that the mere fact of your being engaged in this strange scheme is what prevents me from reciprocating your affections. I can but admire the devotion that has led you to so great a self-sacrifice, questionable though your methods may be."

"Then you mean—?"
"Simply that for another reason as yet unstated, I can never give you my love. Shall I give that reason, or can you not guess it without?"

Mad Madge gave a sudden start, and a gleam of intelligence lighted her eyes.

"You—you are not already married?" she gasped.

"Not fairly within the matrimonial state, yet very near the threshold. I have been engaged for some time to a most worthy young lady, and the wedding is already set for a not far distant day."

"Ah, indeed!"
"This, you see, is a very conclusive reason why I cannot for a moment entertain your proposal."

"Engagements are easily broken," remarked Mad Madge, sententiously.

"By unprincipled people, yes. Surely, you would not desire me to break mine?" exclaimed Headlight Harry, in surprise.

"Did I ask you to?"
"Not directly; but your words implied as much."

With an impatient gesture the Queen suddenly arose, and again paced to and fro over the stony floor. What wild thoughts were struggling in her excited brain? At length she paused before the engineer, and her beautiful face gave no symptom of unusual emotion as she again addressed him.

"So, then, my place in your affections is forestalled by another. The young lady is to be congratulated upon her good fortune in securing the love of so worthy a man. I suppose she must be very beautiful—even more beautiful than I?"

"On the contrary, while by no means bad-looking, yet she might not be considered a beauty by good judges of female loveliness," Headlight Harry frankly admitted. "Compared with you, she is like the modest, unassuming violet beside the proud and queenly rose."

"And yet you prefer her to me?"

"Why not? Beauty is but skin-deep, you know. I love my wife that is to be, not so much for her charms of person as for the many womanly attributes that she possesses. She is intelligent, industrious, affectionate and true—what more does an ordinary, every-day workingman like myself require?"

"Well, there is nothing like being satisfied, I suppose," said the Outlaw Queen, with what was very like a sneer. "But there's really no accounting for some men's tastes. I should like to see this womanly paragon of whom you boast. Pray tell me, what is her name, and where is her abiding-place?"

Even as Headlight Harry was unhesitatingly about to reply to this question, he chanced to catch the devilish gleam that for an instant seemed to dance like some subtle demon in Mad Madge's eyes. Instinctively warned thereby, he was immediately on his guard.

"Come—come! Can you not tell me?" urged the girl, noting his hesitation, and but illy concealing her own impatience to obtain the desired information. "Surely, there can be no secret about the identity of your *inamorata*!"

"Since there can be no conceivable use for further associating the young lady with this unfortunate affair, I must politely but firmly decline to enlighten you on that point," the engineer resolutely declared.

At these words, conveying no doubt of the speaker's determination, Mad Madge threw off the mask of calmness and indifference, and once more allowed her pent-up passions full play.

"Ha, ha, ha!" she laughed, wildly. "So you are suddenly suspicious, eh? With very good reason, too, I assure you. But, do not for an instant suppose that you can thwart my purpose by refusing to answer me. I will seek out this innocent little maid of whom you are so boastfully proud—I will seek her out, I say, and then, Headlight Harry, beware!"

The engineer's heart gave a sudden bound, while his bronzed face turned pale, at this ominous speech of the angry Outlaw Queen. Was it possible that, in her madness, she contemplated harm to his betrothed?

"Why should you desire to search her out? What do you mean, anyhow?" he impatiently demanded.

"What do I mean?" echoed Madge, with another insane laugh. "You shall learn in due time what I mean Headlight Harry! You shall know by just what means I propose to enforce compliance with my wishes. For I do intend to carry my point, despite your strenuous objections, and it is only a question of time when I shall be successful. I offered you my love and you rejected it—laughed my proposition to scorn, because, as you said, the fact of your engagement to another rendered an acceptance impossible. Such being the case, the removal of this other from the way will result in destroying the chief obstacle between us, will it not?"

"In Heaven's name, woman, tell me what you mean! What madness are you about to attempt?" cried the engineer, in desperation.

"Ha, ha! You seem to have awakened a sudden interest in the subject. I fancy I have reached your most vulnerable point. Unfortunately, I am not prepared to enlighten your

anxious mind as to the exact details of my plans; that must be left for your imagination to supply, at least for the present. And now I am obliged to bring this interview to a close, for, owing to your refractory spirit, I have of necessity spent considerable time here that should have been devoted to other purposes. When I see you again, I trust it will be to find you more reconciled to the situation."

"Never!" declared Headlight Harry, emphatically. "I have already given you my answer, and no empty threats on your part can induce me to change it. So you had better turn me loose, and end this farce without further unnecessary palaver."

Mad Madge only smiled grimly.

"You shall soon see whether or not my threats are empty ones," she cried. "Beware how you incur the wrath of Mad Madge, lest, when you know the truth, it will be to sue on bended knees for the love you have so ruthlessly spurned. I have you in my power, Headlight Harry, and in this mountain cavern you shall remain a close prisoner, with no hope of escape to the outside world until you are ready to listen to reason. I will send my men to change your quarters from this, my private apartment, to another better adapted for a captive's cell, where you can repent of your perverseness at leisure. Ha, ha, ha! You see I am determined to break your proud spirit, Headlight Harry, may the effort cost what it will!"

With this taunting speech Mad Madge glided from the room, her weird, mocking laugh floating back to the ears of the young engineer as she abruptly disappeared from view.

CHAPTER IX. IN THE TOILS.

THE strange abduction of Headlight Harry had created a decided sensation in Richville, where he was a universal favorite. Rufe Ruffie's story, giving minute particulars of the mysterious affair, was eagerly listened to and repeated from mouth to mouth; while the newspapers devoted considerable space to the occurrence, characterizing it as a most remarkable link in the chain of stirring events that were just then setting the entire community agog with excitement.

And, while the engineer's strange and unaccountable absence was generally lamented, there was one amid that cityful of people who viewed the startling event with far more than the usual interest, not to say anxiety. That one, it is needless to say, was pretty Ruth Sharon, the betrothed bride of the missing youth.

In a modest, vine-covered little cottage, not far from the Richville Station, nestling cozily against the side of a grassy slope, overlooking the railroad and its numerous trains clattering noisily by—there dwelt the maid who had won Headlight Harry's affections, and who, in that young man's mind at least, was the embodiment of all that was good and true in woman.

A trim, graceful little body, with a decidedly pretty face, cheeks rosy red and lips like ripened cherries; wavy, nut-brown hair hanging in graceful ringlets, and eyes of the same color fairly sparkling with merriment; such in brief, was dainty Ruth Sharon, the flagman's daughter.

Living here alone with her crippled father, performing the multifarious household duties that had devolved upon her since her mother's death, several years before, and consequently deprived of many of the pleasures so tempting to the youth of her sex, hers was a position that few girls would have envied. However, Ruth was perfectly contented in her humble home, finding pleasure both in administering to her father's comfort, and in the pursuit of her everyday duties. And now, possessed of the steadfast love of Headlight Harry, it was to find new enjoyment in anticipating the not far distant day when they would begin the new life of matrimonial blessedness, no more to be separated on earth.

But alas! how rudely was this dream of bliss awakened by the cruel circumstances that now suddenly threatened the happiness of this loving pair. Headlight Harry had been spirited away in a most mysterious manner, while the bride-elect was plunged from the height of joy and hope to the depths of grief and despair.

It was late on the second evening after the engineer's abduction, and most good people were wrapt in peaceful slumber; but from the windows of Seth Sharon's humble dwelling a cheerful light still gleamed, telling that some of its occupants were astir despite the lateness of the hour.

Within her cozy little sitting-room that was her especial pride, the flagman's daughter sat

alone. Reclining listlessly in a comfortable easy-chair, her feet upon an ottoman, her sewing-work on which she had vainly sought to fix her mind lying unheeded in her lap, she presented a most abject spectacle of grief and misery. Her cheeks had lost their rosy bloom, her once bright eyes were dimmed with tears—her entire appearance was woe-begone in the extreme.

She had but just returned from the center of the town, whence she had journeyed to seek some tidings from her missing lover. Fully a score of times had this errand been repeated since the news of his disappearance first reached her ears; and now, as before, the same cruel answer awaited her.

No tidings from Headlight Harry!

Where was her unfortunate lover, and for what fell purpose was he spirited away? Was he yet among the living, or was he—horrible thought—lying at that moment cold in death, in some wild and desolate spot, food for the mountain vultures? It was generally believed in town, she had heard, that the notorious girl bandit, Mad Madge, might, if she chose, clear away the mystery surrounding the engineer's disappearance. This might, or might not, be the case, since at that particular time all deeds of violence and crime were likely to be attributed to the Outlaw Queen, however innocent she might be. If true, however, what could be her motive in kidnapping Headlight Harry? Did this female fiend, said to be beautiful as a houri, wish to steal her handsome lover from her? A pang of jealousy pierced her breast, as, with a woman's wonderful intuition, she divined the truth.

With these and myriad other thoughts surging madly through her fevered brain, poor Ruth endured an existence of intense mental agony. Oh! why had this cruel blow fallen upon her in the very hour of supreme happiness, when the future seemed bright with glorious prospects? The terrible suspense, she feared, was slowly driving her to madness. If she could but receive one word from her absent lover, telling her that he was alive and well, what a welcome relief it would be to her anxious mind!

The hour was growing late, and the lamp burned low. The weary flagman had long since sought much-needed rest in the adjoining bedroom, from which his sonorous snores now resounded with startling distinctness. And still the maid continued her reveries, quite regardless of the flight of time.

Gradually, however, the soothing influences of slumber stole over her senses. Her heavy lids drooped and closed; her head bowed low upon the swelling bosom that regularly rose and fell. Soundly she slept; and for the time her troubles were obliterated.

Swiftly the moments flew, with naught to break the silence save the deep breathing of the sleepers, and the monotonous "tick—tick" of the old-fashioned clock on the mantel, as it faithfully chronicled the flight of time, staring down upon the slumbering girl with its great solemn face as though aghast at this unusual scene.

Lower burned the light, while fantastic shadows disported themselves about the room. The old clock warningly proclaimed the hour of midnight; but still Ruth Sharon slept peacefully on.

Then it was that the two shadowy forms, that for some time past had skulked like red Indians in the thick shrubbery outside, stealthily emerged from their lurking-place and drew nearer to the window from which shone the shimmering light.

The curtain was but partially drawn, and, through the aperture thus opportunely left, it was possible to view much of the interior of the dimly-lighted room—a fact that appeared to give great satisfaction to this pair of midnight prowlers.

Great burly fellows, the latter, whose faces were shrouded by somber masks, through the holes of which their eyes burned with demoniacal glee, as they beheld the apparent object of their search reclining, sound asleep, in the easy-chair, almost within their reach.

Who were these nocturnal prowlers, and what their mission here? What fresh deed of violence was about to be committed?

Without a word, without a sound, the precious pair of rascals went about their business with a dexterity that betokened long practice at such nefarious work. The window was securely fastened by means of the ordinary catch, but this proved only a slight obstacle in the way of the intending house-breakers. A glazier's diamond was produced, and with it a piece of the pane deftly removed. Through the opening thus made it was an easy matter to reach and

undo the fastening, after which the window was noiselessly raised, the entire operation having taken hardly a minute to perform.

One of the unknowns now proceeded to climb through the open window, his passage being greatly facilitated by a liberal boost from the accomplice who remained outside. In another moment he alighted, catlike, upon the floor of the apartment, and stood with gloating eyes fixed upon the fair girl who peacefully slumbered scarce ten feet away.

Poor Ruth Sharon! Was she, too, destined to fall an easy victim to the wiles of these midnight marauders? Was there no escape from the horrible peril that threatened her?

Pausing only for an instant, the bold intruder moved stealthily toward his unconscious victim. Suddenly she stirred, while muttered words fell from her parted lips. Was she about to wake? Like a flash, the masked visitor vanished behind a high-backed rocker; but his alarm proved to be quite groundless. Ruth was only dreaming—a very pleasant dream, judging by the sweet smile that played about her marble face. Alas! could she have but known the truth, that blissful dream would have had a rude awakening.

Once more the stalwart intruder resumed his interrupted work. Drawing still closer, he bent over the sleeping maiden; then, producing from his pocket a large handkerchief, he saturated it with the contents of a tiny vial, and with a dexterous movement clapped it over her nose and mouth. The effect was instantaneous, for the half-wakened girl gave one start, convulsive struggle, then lay like one dead, quite overcome by the powerful drug.

An audible chuckle escaped the miscreant's lips, as for a moment he gloatingly surveyed his work; the next, he had lifted the frail form lightly in his powerful arms and passed it through the window to the accomplice who waited impatiently outside. Across the garden and into the road, the triumphant night-hawks now noiselessly flitted with their prey, to the spot where several comrades with horses anxiously awaited their coming. One minute later, the mysterious party was riding swiftly along the road that led from the town into the country, in the direction of the neighboring mountains; while across the saddle of her stalwart captor, supported by his giant arm, poor Ruth Sharon lay, unconscious of her terrible situation.

CHAPTER X.

THE WRECKERS AT WORK.

THAT Mad Madge, the Outlaw Queen, was fully resolved to carry out to the letter those terrible threats embodied in her famous manifesto, was evidenced by the series of startling exploits that followed closely upon the Express robbery and the equally audacious kidnapping of Headlight Harry.

Freight trains were ruthlessly plunged over steep embankments, such of the crews as escaped with life and limb driven away, and the cars plundered and burned. Several passenger trains, too, heavily laden with precious humanity, were saved from a similar fate only by extraordinary vigilance and good fortune. Depots and other railroad property at various points along the line vanished at dead of night before the flaming torch of the incendiary. Growing even bolder, the marauders next invaded the Richville yard, in the very heart of the town, overpowered the watchmen, ruined fully a dozen costly locomotives that were housed for the night, destroyed a large quantity of tools and supplies, and finally departed after kindling an extensive conflagration that was extinguished only when thousands of dollars worth of property had gone up in smoke.

These startling deeds of vandalism and crime followed one another in swift and bewildering succession. Scarcely was one wreck cleared away and the tracks rendered passable, when another even more serious would startle the community, and bring fresh toil and trouble to the exasperated railroad men.

Mad Madge's predictions, so lately laughed to scorn by the haughty railroad magnates, were already becoming verified; for, as the existence of this chaotic state of affairs on the R. & S. rapidly became known on every hand, that luckless road suffered an immediate loss of traffic in all its departments. Intending passengers either stayed at home or chose some more roundabout route, preferring this inconvenience to risking their precious lives; while shippers were equally chary about making consignments *via* this line, when it was almost a certainty that their freight would either bring up at the bottom of a ditch or vanish in smoke before the incendiary's torch.

The circumstance of so many incendiary fires occurring simultaneously at numerous stations, covering a distance of fifty miles or more, was evidence that Mad Madge had her secret emissaries well distributed along the line. However, the various wrecks and robberies, which would naturally require greater numerical strength to accomplish, had all taken place within a few miles of Richville; and this would indicate that the Outlaw Queen's main force was concentrated at no great distance from that town.

Yet, while the opinion generally prevailed that the authors of all this mischief had their rendezvous somewhere among the neighboring mountains, the authorities had as yet proved unequal to the task of ferreting them out. Lying carefully concealed by day, the miscreants continued their dastardly work under cover of darkness, laughing to scorn all efforts to check their career of outlawry and crime.

And while the authorities seemed powerless to cope with this new and enormous evil, the unlucky railroad people were plunged into the depths of despair. If such a chaotic state of affairs had been brought about in a few short days, what might not be anticipated a month hence, if Mad Madge were permitted to continue her revengeful career uninterrupted?

It was to be feared that the latter, in her insane thirst for vengeance, would fulfill her dire threats to the very letter, nor rest content from her dreadful work until the entire road was annihilated; and, in her impatience to accomplish this fell purpose, it was likely that she would continue to "strike while the iron was hot," before the dazed and terror-stricken community could recover sufficiently to offer effectual resistance.

The next exploit of the notorious Outlaw Queen was fully equal to her past efforts in point of audacity.

As before stated, though several attempts had already been made to wreck various passenger trains, the alertness of the trainmen had in every instance enabled them to discover and avert the threatening peril, much to the discomfort and rage of the would-be wreckers. However, such immunity from the wrath of Mad Madge was not long to continue.

The first to succumb to her cunning machinations was the evening Mail-and-Express—the train that Headlight Harry had driven, up to the time of his involuntary visit to the secret haunts of the Outlaw Queen.

Since his strange disappearance, the run was given to Rufe Ruffle, and that gallant youth, in the face of trying circumstances, had acquitted himself with great ability in his new and responsible position. Constantly on the lookout for danger, Rufe was never more vigilant than upon this particular occasion; nevertheless, he went straight into the trap that cunning hands had prepared.

It was an early hour in the evening, and the train was rapidly approaching the end of its long homeward run. The night was dark as Erebus, and objects along the line were distinguishable only by means of the powerful headlight. At a point perhaps a dozen miles from Richville, the road ran through a deep and narrow cut, the precipitous sides of which arose to a height of a hundred feet or more on either hand. This place was abruptly approached around a sharp and giddy curve, rendering it impossible for an engineer to see objects in the cut until close upon them, even in broad daylight.

As the train rounded this curve at ordinary speed, and plunged between the gloomy walls of the cut, the headlight's far-extending rays suddenly revealed a spectacle that fairly caused Rufe Ruffle's hair to rise with horror. There, directly in front of the speeding iron-horse, an enormous boulder blocked the way, threatening instant destruction to the train and all on board.

Even as the gaze of the horrified engineer fell upon this terrible monster lying across his course, it was to fully comprehend the enormity of the impending peril, and spring with ready hands to the task of averting it, quite hopeless though that task might be.

One short, sharp, piercing whistle for brakes, a frantic but futile endeavor to check the train's wild flight, then—

With scarcely abated speed, the ponderous locomotive collided with that huge, unyielding mass of stone, with a mighty clash that shook the very hills. The great iron-horse, its headlong flight so suddenly arrested, reared into the air like a prancing steed, then fell over upon its side in the adjacent ditch, crushing the unlucky fireman who was unable to escape in time to save his life.

Rufe Ruffle was more fortunate, being upon the side opposite to that chosen by the iron steed for its fatal plunge; and a desperate leap, at the very moment of the collision, carried him to safety upon the sloping bank.

Nor did the disaster end with the derailment of the locomotive; for one car followed another in swift succession, until the entire train was precipitated into the ditch. Then ensued a scene of terror and confusion, quite impossible for words to adequately describe.

Where once was mirth and gayety, horror now reigned. Men, women and children suddenly found themselves pent up within the overturned coaches, in many instances pinioned by car-seats and shattered timbers, and their frantic cries for help rung in agonized accents upon the evening air. To increase the horror of the situation, the burning oil from the broken lamps in the coaches quickly kindled a blaze that, spreading with terrible rapidity, threatened to speedily consume the train and its imprisoned occupants.

As soon as they could recover sufficiently from their surprise and bewilderment, the trainmen and passengers who had escaped from the wreck with little or no injury, now hastened to the assistance of their less fortunate companions. With Herculean energy the work of rescue was pushed to completion, and in an incredibly short time the injured ones were all removed beyond the reach of the devouring flames.

It was then found that, while some were seriously crushed and burned, and nearly all had suffered more or less injury, yet no one was killed outright, with the single exception of the unfortunate fireman, whose mangled form was lying beneath the ponderous locomotive.

Thankful that the situation was no worse, the bruised and weary travelers, whose journey had thus been disastrously interrupted, now gathered in an eager group around the burning train, to discuss the best means of escaping from their unpleasant predicament. It was while thus engaged that a piercing whistle suddenly sounded upon their startled ears, and, looking anxiously about, it was to become aware that other people than themselves were upon the scene.

The steep banks on either side had suddenly become alive with masked men, grim and terrible in their garb of somber black, each with belts fairly bristling with small-arms, while two rows of gleaming rifles frowned down upon the amazed group in the cut below.

And from their midst emerged a person of slender form and graceful pose, who, though fully masked, and dressed in man's attire, all intuitively knew to be no other than Mad Madge, the notorious Queen of Outlaws.

Boldly she descended into the very center of the astonished crowd.

"Hands up, gentlemen!" she cried, authoritatively. "We have you well covered, as you may see, and the first sign of opposition on your part will result in immediate bloodshed."

This command was obeyed without demur, for while the victims felt quite in the mood to resist the dastardly authors of their present misfortune, they were quick to realize that, all unarmed as they were, there was no chance for success with that double row of deadly Winchester's staring them in the face.

An amused laugh escaped Mad Madge's lips as she noted the ludicrous haste with which her imperative order was obeyed.

"Glad to find you so docile, good people," she remarked, sarcastically. "Such meekness and obedience does you credit, especially after such a rough and blood-stirring experience as you have just passed through. Really, I suppose I ought to apologize for interrupting your journey in this unceremonious fashion; the fact is, I was exceedingly anxious to scrape your acquaintance, and knew of no better way of forcing an introduction. With your kind permission, I will now hasten to commence my work, for I see that yonder flames are creeping dangerously close to the coveted treasure."

A single wave of her gloved hand was the signal for the work of plunder to begin; and, while half the outlaws still maintained the drop upon their victims, on the alert to frustrate any attempt at opposition, the remainder hurried to secure the valuable contents of the Mail-and-Express cars, around the sides of which ravenous tongues of flame had already begun to twine.

But a short time was required in which to secure the booty, and, this done, the marauders quietly awaited the orders of their youthful chief.

The latter had eagerly watched the operations of her men, and now she turned once more to the group of anxious passengers, many of whom, having been caught in similar predicaments be-

fore, felt their disgust increase with the thought that they would next be called upon to surrender their pocketbooks and jewelry to the avacious train-robbers.

In this, however, they were agreeably disappointed; for Mad Madge, seeming to divine their thoughts, laughed good-naturedly as she exclaimed:

"Don't bother to produce your valuables, gentlemen. I assure you I have no use for them. Understand, please, that I am working solely for revenge; and that my efforts are directed against the road—not its innocent passengers. I sincerely regret that, in this particular instance, it was necessary to put you all to such great personal inconvenience, in order to accomplish my purpose. And now, having completed my night's work, I will no longer trouble—He! Whom have we here! The president's daughter, as I live!"

While speaking, the Outlaw Queen had glanced carelessly over the expectant throng, and as her gaze rested upon one particular face, every feature of which was plainly revealed by the glare of the conflagration, she gave a sudden start of recognition, while the excited words above quoted fell from her lips.

It was, indeed, Mabel Melrose, the fair daughter of the great railway magnate—a *petite*, graceful blonde of perfect form and feature, who had thus unluckily attracted the attention of Mad Madge, at the moment when she seemed about to depart. Returning home from a visit to a distant relative, she had chanced to be upon this ill-starred train, but fortunately escaped from the wreck without serious injury.

Mabel's rosy cheeks suddenly paled at finding herself the direct object of the Outlaw Queen's attention, and, as the latter advanced, she shrunk behind a friend in abject terror.

"So you are Maurice Melrose's daughter, eh?" cried Mad Madge, eagerly. "Do not attempt to conceal your identity, for I know you well. This is, indeed, a meeting as pleasant as it is unexpected, for I have long anticipated another interview with the railway nabob's daughter. Now, young lady, I am sorry to interrupt your journey, but it is quite imperative that you should accompany me to my headquarters. I have a most excellent reason for claiming you for my guest; and I trust you will accept the situation gracefully."

Like a thunderbolt in their midst fell this dire announcement from the lips of the Outlaw Queen. Mabel Melrose gave a piercing scream as, in obedience to their leader's signal, two outlaws advanced to seize her; then, quite overcome with affright, fell fainting in the arms of her friends.

A murmur of indignation ran through the crowd, and there was a movement as if to prevent the carrying out of this dastardly outrage; but the decisive action of Mad Madge's redoubtable band quickly dampened their ardor. A score of rifle-locks suddenly clicked in unison, and as many gleaming barrels conveyed until the rebellious passengers found themselves completely surrounded by a cordon of rifles, ready to belch forth their deadly contents at an instant's notice. In the face of such overwhelming odds, resistance was sheer foolhardiness; and so the poor girl's friends were forced to stand idly by, and see her borne away, limp and unconscious, in the arms of two burly ruffians.

Five minutes later the Train Wreckers had disappeared as silently as they came, bearing away to their distant mountain retreat beautiful Mabel Melrose, the belle of Richville; while her friends, bitterly lamenting their inability to prevent the heinous outrage, lingered sorrowfully near the burning train, the lurid light from which, mounting high in the heavens, was already drawing the attention of people for miles around to the awful scene of desolation and death.

CHAPTER XI.

RAYS OF HOPE.

MEANWHILE, a close prisoner in Mad Madge's subterranean retreat, Headlight Harry was bravely enduring a most miserable existence. Carrying out her threat, the Queen had caused a change in his quarters immediately after their stormy interview; so that he no longer occupied her comfortable private apartment. The place in which he now found himself, was a small and cell-like room, hardly ten feet square, separated from the main cavern by a natural partition of solid rock, through which a narrow passage extended, providing the only means of ingress or egress. This passage was blocked at the outer

entrance, by a heavy slab of stone, the latter being securely fastened in place from the outside, thus rendering it impossible for the prisoner to leave his cell. As a further precaution against any attempt he might make to escape, the engineer's arms were now securely bound behind his back, being released only for the purpose of eating the food that a masked attendant brought in at regular intervals.

Within this natural prison-cell, furnished only with a rude couch, and a dingy lamp upon the wall which shed its feeble light upon the bare and cheerless surroundings, Headlight Harry remained for what seemed to his restless mind to be a month at least, but which his trusty chronometer showed to be an actual period of two days and nights. During that time his only visitor was the man who brought his meals—a morose fellow who performed his duties in utter silence, ignoring the volleys of interrogation points fired at him by the prisoner, whose impatience and anxiety was momentarily increasing.

Meantime, where was Mad Madge? What new schemes of devilry was she so industriously engaged upon that she could find no opportunity for a second interview? The novelty of his unparalleled position as the recalcitrant lover of a dashing female bandit, who had lured him to her mountain stronghold in order to secure him, was at first decidedly pleasing to the young man's adventurous nature; but when he comprehended how fully in earnest was the grief-crazed maiden, and to what extremes she was ready to go to accomplish her ardent purpose, it was to lose all love of the sensational, and heartily wish himself well out of his awkward predicament.

The ominous threats of the Outlaw Queen, in reference to Ruth Sharon, both surprised and alarmed him. Was it possible that the vengeance of the former could be directed upon this pure and innocent maiden? Fortunately, he had been shrewd enough to withhold the name of his betrothed; yet, to this beautiful fiend in female guise, who seemed capable of accomplishing all manner of evil deeds, would it not be a simple matter to discover her identity? And then—to what deed of violence might she not be driven, in her insane jealousy?

Tortured by such mad thoughts as these, Headlight Harry's position was fast becoming unendurable. Therefore, it was with feelings of relief and pleasure that, on the morning of the third day of his imprisonment, he heard footsteps in the passage, and looked up to once more behold the Outlaw Queen.

A peculiar smile appeared upon the fair face of Madge Norman—a smile at once so sinister, so expressive of malignant triumph, that the engineer intuitively divined that something of rare importance had occurred during her prolonged absence.

"Ha, ha! So my precious prisoner is still safe and sound, though looking a trifle pale after his long confinement. A little fresh air, I fancy, would not come amiss," was her familiar greeting, as she entered the narrow cell.

"The fact that you have left me for two whole days and nights to languish alone in this confounded hole, is not very conclusive evidence of your desire for my personal comfort," sarcastically retorted Headlight Harry. "I'd rather be taken out and shot, *sans* ceremony, than endure this miserable existence much longer. It's fortunate your worthy grub-dispenser was not equally neglectful, else I would certainly have become transformed into a living skeleton by this time."

"Which would have been a fate fearful, indeed, to contemplate," laughed Madge. "However, I trust you will pardon my apparent neglect, for I assure you it was unavoidable, as I have been exceedingly busy putting a few of my cherished plans into execution. That I have been highly successful in these, goes without saying; for Mad Madge never fails in anything that she seriously undertakes."

"I have a great surprise in store for you, Headlight Harry—the nature of which you can hardly guess. It is to the effect that the number of my guests—or prisoners, whichever you choose to call them—has recently been increased; and the new-comers, I believe—or, at least, one of them—are particular friends of yours. Are you not delighted at the prospect of meeting them here, beneath my hospitable roof?"

The engineer gave a sudden start of surprise, while his bronzed face grew pale. Was it possible that—?

"I see you are interested," continued Mad Madge, before he had time to speak; "so I will endeavor to explain matters to the best of my

ability. First, let me tell briefly of a few important events that have occurred in the outside world during your temporary sequestration."

She skimmed rapidly over her various exploits, with Headlight Harry an attentive listener, finally touching upon the wrecking of the evening Mail-and-Express, and the attendant capture of Mabel Melrose.

"You will doubtless recollect that the daughter of the railway president was once before in a similar position, having been seized by my father, Nick Norman, and carried to his secret home in the wilderness. His object was to extort a large ransom from the wealthy nabob for the safe return of the lady; but, very unfortunately, he met death at the hands of his enemies ere such a result could be brought about. Now, it has for some time been in my mind to repeat my father's plan—to gain possession of this proud heiress and exact a pretty penny for her return; so you can imagine my elation at meeting her among the passengers of the Express, for I had not anticipated securing the coveted prize so easily. I have her here, safe and sound; and the haughty Maurice Melrose will needs come down handsomely with the dust, if he desires to ever see his darling daughter again.

"But I will hurry on to another subject, in which I know you will feel a still greater interest. At about the hour last night that my gallant band reached home, after the successful plundering of the Mail-and-Express, a small detachment composed of my most trustworthy men was riding away from the stronghold, bound on a most important and delicate mission. That mission was to proceed to a certain dwelling in the very heart of Richville town, take a fair maiden from her home, at dead of night, and convey her to this distant mountain retreat. Quite a difficult commission, you may well say; yet, incredible as the statement may seem, my trusty minions accomplished their work so nicely that the fair victim had no knowledge of what was transpiring, until she at length awoke to find herself an inmate of my private chamber. Now, Headlight Harry, can you not guess the identity of my latest guest? Listen! She is none other than Ruth Sharon, the flagman's daughter!"

With ashy face and staring eyes, the young engineer heard the startling utterance of the girl-demon before him; and something like a groan escaped his bloodless lips.

"Ruth Sharon here? Impossible!" he gasped, though fully convinced, even as he spoke, that the crushing announcement was all too true.

"Yes; here, I repeat! In this very cavern, not a hundred feet from the spot on which you are now standing," reiterated Mad Madge, gleefully. "If you doubt my words, just come and test the evidence of your own eyes."

"But why—why have you brought her to this dismal place?"

The Outlaw Queen laughed loud in ghoulish glee.

"Why have I brought her here? Why, indeed! Simply because she is your sweetheart—your betrothed wife! Ha, ha, ha! Did you for a moment suppose that I would fail to discover her whereabouts? Why, nothing in the world was easier to ascertain; for does not half Richville know of your engagement to the pretty flagman's daughter?"

Wretched in look and spirit, the engineer vouchsafed no reply; while for a few moments Mad Madge, too, was silent, evidently enjoying his manifest discomfort. Finally she spoke again:

"Now, Headlight Harry, I have carefully explained matters leading up to the very present moment; and, since you comprehend the situation perfectly, perhaps we shall be able to come to some understanding between ourselves, regarding the subject of which I spoke at our first interview."

"Well, I am ready to listen to whatever you choose to say, but I warn you beforehand that it will be a mere waste of breath on your part," declared Headlight Harry, firmly. "I have already answered you fully on the subject, and have as yet seen no good reason for reversing my decision."

"What? do you still defy me?" cried Mad Madge, with eyes ablaze. "With the knowledge that your sweetheart is at this moment hopelessly in my power, do you still meet my proposition with scorn? Beware, Headlight Harry! You are as yet ignorant of the penalty of continued refusal."

"Oh, I suppose I shall be hung, drawn and quartered, or something else equally horrible. I fully believe you are capable of it," rejoined the engineer, with a brave effort to appear unconcerned, though his heart was already sinking

in anticipation of the words about to issue from the lips of the Outlaw Queen.

"Not upon you, but upon the innocent girl whom you adore, shall the burden of my vengeance fall," declared the latter, speaking with startling energy and distinctness. "It was for this purpose that I brought Ruth Sharon here. Through her I propose to humble your proud spirit, and bring you in subjection at my feet. Now, listen to my ultimatum!"

"Agree at once to the proposition already submitted, and Ruth shall go free—free to win another lover, and enjoy a life of sunshine and happiness. On the other hand, persist in refusal and I shall immediately turn her over to the tender mercies of my band. You can readily imagine what that signifies! Now, Headlight Harry, knowing the alternative, will you not come to terms?"

Coolly, deliberately, these thrilling words fell from the lips of the Outlaw Queen. There was no mistaking the terrible earnestness of her purpose: and, as the young engineer listened, anger, disgust and horror found expression upon his bloodless face.

"Mad Madge, you are a very fiend in human guise!" he cried, in righteous indignation. "No sober-minded woman would so far forget herself as to talk in such a wild, blood-curdling manner. You are, indeed, a madwoman—a beautiful demon!"

The Outlaw Queen laughed bitterly.

"Yes; you are right! I am a madwoman; yet, there is method in my madness. Truly has it been said that 'hell hath no fury like a woman scorned.' You have rejected my proposal—laughed my professions of love to scorn; and this is my revenge. Through the woman you love so truly, I will reach your hard heart and bring your proud spirit into subjection. I have no doubt what your decision will be, now that you know the alternative. No man, without he be an arrant coward at heart, would for an instant hesitate to make a slight self-sacrifice, rather than see a loved one consigned to life-long misery and shame."

"I go, now, to issue orders for the day's campaign, for my work of vengeance must go on without interruption. In two hours' time I shall return to learn your final decision. If still unfavorable, my threats shall be put into immediate execution. I swear it; and Mad Madge always keeps her oath!"

So saying, the Queen turned to depart. As her receding footsteps died away, Headlight Harry paced the floor of his narrow cell in an agony of suspense and horror. The situation was far more terrible than he had dreamed, for there was not the slightest doubt that this mad creature intended to carry out her awful threats to the very letter.

As he pondered deeply over the affair, it was to feel that he, himself, was to blame for Ruth's misfortune. Had he but feigned acquiescence to Mad Madge's plans when first proposed, and quietly awaited a favorable opportunity for escape, it was probable that the flagman's daughter would never have been molested. But now, even though he professed to accept the girl bandit's proposition, he had little faith in the latter's promises, and feared that his betrothed would never escape from the presence of that insanely-jealous woman alive.

Mentally cursing his own stupidity, Headlight Harry walked up and down like a caged tiger. In two short hours the crisis would be reached! Meantime, was there no way to foil the schemes of this beautiful demon? With poor Ruth Sharon a captive, only a few yards away, could not her escape by some means be effected?

Turning suddenly in his excitement, he slipped upon the smooth, stony floor of the cell, and in a desperate attempt to recover, pitched heavily against the inner wall.

Instantly there was a sound of crumbling stone, and to the engineer's great amazement, he beheld a yawning gap in what had apparently been a solid mass of rock. As soon as he could recover sufficiently to make an investigation, he found that the wall was in reality but a thin partition—one of the numerous freaks of nature to be found in this wonderful series of subterranean chambers; and being here but a few inches thick and of a brittle formation, it required only a violent blow to demolish it.

And with this strange discovery came renewed hope and courage to the young engineer. Did not this subterranean passage, so strangely revealed, form an outlet to the open air? If so, there was still a chance of escape during the two hours of grace that yet remained.

With his heavy boot, Headlight Harry enlarged the opening until it would admit of the passage of his body. Then, taking the dingy

lamp down from the wall, he passed through the yawning gap boldly, determined to explore the unknown region beyond.

Finding himself in a roomy passage, he moved cautiously ahead, his footsteps guided by the flickering light that but partially relieved the intense gloom. As he went, hopes that the passage led to the outside world were mingled with fears that, on the contrary, it was only taking him still further into the bowels of the mountain. However, an occasional breath of cold air upon his face, together with the fact that the way was now gradually ascending, encouraged him to believe that the first theory was correct.

Suddenly Headlight Harry paused, for his quick ear had caught the sound of approaching footsteps in the passage ahead. There was no time to retreat, no friendly niche in the wall to afford concealment; and, as the engineer stood in momentary bewilderment, two shadowy forms confronted him!

CHAPTER XII.

FRIENDS TO THE RESCUE.

"YAS, pard, it's true enuff that I've knocked off work for a day or two. Oh, no! 'Tain't 'cause I'm rattled on account o' that smash-up last night. I'm j-st as clear-headed an' gritty to-day as ever I was, if I do have to say it myself. But, ye see, I've got an important job on hand, the same bein' to hunt up my missin' pard, Headlight Harry, an' I reckon it'll require my undivided time an' attention in order to make any kind o' headway."

"I, too, am decidedly of that opinion, since the authorities have failed ignominiously in their endeavor to solve the mystery of the engineer's disappearance."

The first speaker was Rufe Ruffle; the second, Roy Noble the Express-messenger; scene, the much-frequented club-room of the Richville railroad boys, on the morning succeeding the destruction of the Mail-and-Express. The doughty fireman had found it necessary to make a liberal application of court-plaster, to cover the numerous cuts and scratches received in his desperate life-leap from the locomotive; but this, while scarcely adding to his beauty, could not conceal the resolute look upon his face, as he expressed himself in the uncouth and vigorous terms so characteristic of the man.

Roy Noble, too, wore a look of unusual seriousness and determination. Mad Madge's most recent exploit—the abduction of Mabel Melrose—was of the utmost personal importance to him, enjoying as he did the proud position of husband-elect of the railway magnate's beautiful daughter. It was with mingled grief and indignation that he learned of the outrage, and now, beneath a calm exterior, there burned an ardent desire to hasten to her rescue.

"Authorities, hey? Bah! Don't mention 'em. What do they amount to, anyway?—jest makin' a big bluff at doin' nothin', an' drawin' a good fat salary for it," and Rufe Ruffle's tone was fully indicative of his contempt. "Why, it's been three hull days since my pard was knocked in the head like a beef-critter, an' carried off, body, bones an' breeches. An' what have the authorities done, in the mean time, to find out whether he is dead or alive? They've done a powerful lot o' talkin' an' considerable monkeyin' around, but what the dickens does that amount to? The fact is, this 'tarnal Mad Madge bizness has completely flabbergasted 'em. They're afraid—downright afraid—to make any determined move against these pesky outlaws; an' that's the hull sum an' substance of it. Now, I'm sick an' disgusted waitin' for the proper parties to perform their duty an' clear up the mystery surrounding the fate of Headlight Harry. So, I'm jest a-goin' to pitch right in, without further palaver, an' do up the job myself. You hear me?"

The messenger's face expressed both incredulity and amusement.

"Yours is a truly laudable intention, Rufe; but I fear that, when you attempt to carry out your purpose, it will be to speedily find you have bitten off more than you can chew, as the expression is. How in the world do you expect to succeed where others have signally failed?"

"Simply by the exercise of a little sound hoss sense, backed up by plenty of Yankee pluck and energy," was the bold fireman's ready retort. "All these qualities, I reckon, were decidedly lacking in the individuals to whom you allude; hence their ignominious failure."

"But still I don't quite see the light, Rufe, my boy. Tell me, what are your plans, and why are you so sanguine of success?"

"Well, pard, ever since the night that Headlight Harry disappeared without even bidding

us good-by, I have be'n doin' a powerful lot of thinkin'; an' I've reached the conclusion that Mad Madge, the gal bandit, is the very duck that's got him foul, though what the deuce she wants him for is more than my thick noddle can comprehend. However, it's sartain that she's got him in a box, an' I have purty good reasons for believin' that their present quarters are at no great distance from this town.

"The day before yesterday was Sunday, ye know, an' bein' off duty, I improved the opportunity to do a little detective work on my own hook. For my base of operations, I selected the station at which Harry was removed from the engine by his captors. It was not long before I fell in with a lanky backwoodsman, who had an interesting story to relate. Riding over the lonely country road that night, he had suddenly encountered a party of mounted men who were hastening in an opposite direction. Suspicious of strangers, he had discreetly sought concealment in the bushes; and, as they passed rapidly by, he saw that they were four in number, and that one of them bore across the pommel of his saddle an object that looked strangely like a human form. That object, you kin readily bet, was the body of Headlight Harry.

"Directly opposite his hiding-place, the four unknown left the highway an' plunged inter the woods with their burden. An' subsequently, after bein' directed to the place, which is several miles from the railroad, a brief search resulted in the discovery of a narrow bridle-path leading up the mountain-side. Though I didn't pursue my investigation any further at the time, bein' alone an' unarmed, an' afraid of runnin' inter some o' the cantankerous varmints, there ain't a doubt in my mind that this mountain trail leads straight into the den of Mad Madge."

"I'm exactly of the same opinion, pard," exclaimed Roy Noble, who had listened eagerly to the fireman's revelations. "But why have you not imparted this important discovery to the authorities, thus giving them a tangible clew to work upon?"

"The authorities be dod-blasted!" was Rufe's irrelevant rejoinder. "D'ye s'pose I'm goin' to give the result of my labors to the p'izen authorities, free gratis for nothin', an' then see 'em make a botch o' the hull business? No, sir-ee! I'm jest a-goin' to circulate 'round amongst the boys, an' pick up a little party of my own, with which I propose to take the trail against Mad Madge—to invade her stronghold, rescue her prisoners, and smash the hull gang into smithereens! What d'ye think o' that for a scheme?"

"Excellent! And you can count me in, through thick and thin," cried the Express-messenger, enthusiastically. "But we should lose no time in perfecting our plans. Delays are dangerous, you know."

"This very night will find us on the war-path," the fireman confidently declared. "Now then, the first act is to hustle for volunteers, for without a strong force back of us we kin do nothin'. Any minor arrangements kin be made afterwards."

Five minutes later the two friends separated, each bent on securing volunteers for the proposed expedition. So well did they succeed that, shortly after nightfall, over a score of sturdy fellows reported at the appointed place, all well armed, and eager to take a hand at outlaw-hunting. The organizers of this avenging band had picked their men with great care and deliberation, choosing only those personally known to be men of true courage, who could be thoroughly relied upon in an emergency. A small force, they reasoned, made up of men like these, was highly preferable to a larger party comprising some of untried quality, who doubtless would not only run themselves at the first smell of gunpowder, but also tend to demoralize the others.

The contemplated movement against the outlaws was carefully kept a secret from the public at large, lest one of Mad Madge's spies, of whom there were probably several in town, should carry the alarm to his chief in advance of the avengers.

Shortly before midnight a through freight train pulled slowly out of Richville, on its way west; and within the caboose might have been seen Rufe Ruffle and his resolute band of outlaw-hunters. They left the train at the proper point, and trudged silently over the miles of dusty country road that intervened between them and the immediate scene of the proposed action. Reaching the place where the mountain trail diverged from the highway, ample opportunity was given to take a much-needed rest, it being impracticable to continue further until daylight came to guide their way.

Promptly at the break of day, however, the

onward movement of the outlaw-hunters was resumed. Entering upon the mountain trail that was supposed to lead to Mad Madge's secret stronghold, they moved slowly and cautiously in single file, each man with weapon ready for instant use, as he realized they were now treading on dangerous ground.

Pushing laboriously through the maze of briars and bushes that choked the narrow path and presented a serious barrier to rapid progress, they had reached a point some distance from the highway when—

Suddenly there came a deafening crash of firearms, and a biting storm of lead assailed the astonished trailers, while, simultaneously, a series of exultant yells told that the outlaws were wide awake and ready to receive them.

CHAPTER XIII.

VICTORY.

STUNNED by that withering volley, the devoted band of outlaw-hunters stood for a moment in surprise and indecision; before the greeting could be repeated, however, they had recovered sufficiently to seek shelter behind friendly trees and boulders.

Several men were struck by the flying bullets, but fortunately their injuries were not severe. It was, however, a serious blow to their cherished scheme, and their disgust and rage was indescribable. At this early hour the trailers had hoped to find their enemies asleep, but it seemed the latter were already up and dressed, and ready to give all unwelcome visitors a hot reception.

Ensconced behind an enormous boulder, the discomfited leaders of the expedition hurriedly discussed the situation. Despite this repulse at the very start, they were in no wise disheartened. The fact that the outlaws were aware of their presence would, of course, render the work of rescue much more difficult to accomplish; but, succeed they would, by some means or other. The trailers were fully determined upon that point, though it must be admitted that, just at that particular moment, the manner in which this herculean task was to be performed was by no means clear to either.

"Catch a wessel askep, eh? I reckon not," was Rufe Ruffle's remark, as he ruefully rubbed the cheek where an outlaw's bullet had plowed a bloody crease. "Instead o' givin' the varmints a s'prise-party, we've be'n most decidedly surprised ourselves. Jiminy! It's a wonder we weren't all wiped out."

"That friendly greeting was from the sentinels, I imagine. Of course the shots will arouse the rest of the gang, and we'll have a regular hornets' nest about our ears in a few minutes."

"I reckon the varmints will act entirely on the defensive, at present. However, if they should attack our position, we are sufficiently well-posted to hold our own."

"Which is not at all what we are here for. Our purpose is to force the enemy's position; and hang me if I don't think the job will be a mighty tough one."

"Nevertheless, the victory shall be ours," said the fireman, in grim determination.

"There's more'n one way to skin a cat; and so, I believe, there is another way of gettin' at our friends up the hillside, there. It therefore behooves us to reconnoiter a little, in view of finding a way by which we can attack the enemy from the rear. No time to waste here, doin' nothin', so let's git a good-sized move on."

"An excellent idea, and I'm with you at once," assured the messenger, who was equally anxious to take decisive action.

So, leaving their men strongly posted, with orders to await their return, the leaders moved cautiously in a direction that took them obliquely up the hillside. Screened by the dense undergrowth that intervened, their maneuvers escaped the notice of the outlaw sentries, who lurked still further up the rugged trail.

They had proceeded but a short distance when Roy Noble, who was slightly in the rear, suddenly heard a startled exclamation from his companion, and looked just in time to behold the latter throw up his arms and disappear from view.

Rushing forward in alarm, it was to find the fireman sprawling at the bottom of a yawning pit, into which he had unwittingly tumbled.

"You're a pretty spectacle, I declare. Where in the world are your eyes?" saluted the messenger, laughing quietly at the ludicrous situation of his comrade.

"The top of the confounded hole was completely covered over with brush—that's the reason I walked right into it," was Rufe's ex-

cuse, as he scrambled to his feet. "But I say, pard, come down here, quick! I've made a big discovery!"

"The dickens you have! What is it?" and Roy joined his comrade with alacrity.

"This here place is the entrance to some subterranean passage, which leads—"

"To the outlaws' retreat," eagerly broke in the messenger, at once greatly interested in this new discovery. "It is quite possible that Mad Madge has taken up quarters in a cavern, and this is one of the avenues leading to it."

"In that case, seems ter me they'd have a guard at the entrance," said Rufe, doubtfully.

"Seemingly so, indeed; yet it's quite possible that the outlaws have failed to fully explore the recesses of their cavern retreat, and so remain in ignorance of a second entrance. How does that theory strike you?"

"Hang me if I don't b'lieve ye'r' right, pard," averred the fireman, eagerly. "I reckon it'll pay us to explore this place a bit, an' see where the deuce it does lead to."

Accordingly, the trailers boldly entered the passage, cautiously groping their way, step by step, through the Stygian gloom that immediately encompassed them.

They proceeded in utter silence; ever on the alert for danger, and yet quite unprepared for the complete surprise that awaited them when, after covering a distance of perhaps fifty feet, they rounded an abrupt turn in the passage and saw standing before them, lamp in hand, the familiar figure of Headlight Harry!

It would be hard to say which of the three men was most astonished at this unexpected meeting. For some moments they stood like images of stone, unable to believe the evidence of their senses. When, however, they did recover themselves, mutual explanations were quickly in order. It was, indeed, a most remarkable and Providential meeting, and all hands were naturally elate to a high degree.

"Thanks to this opportune meeting, victory is thrown within our grasp; but prompt and decisive action is necessary in order to secure it," Headlight Harry hurriedly exclaimed. "Bring your men here without delay. It will be an easy matter to effect an entrance to the main cavern from this side, and so take the outlaws completely by surprise. I will leave this lamp here to guide you, for I can find my way back quite readily without it. Now, be off; but there's not a minute to waste. Success depends entirely upon your celerity of movement."

"Ye kin expect us back with the boys, jest as quick as the law allows," was Rufe Ruffle's parting assurance, as the three friends again separated.

As the engineer groped his way back to the cell, it was to feel hope and elation rise buoyantly in the breast where but recently dwelt the deepest grief and despair. With the knowledge of so many stanch friends hastening to the rescue, he was confident that, if all went well, another hour at most would find him master of the situation.

Waiting impatiently for the reappearance of his friends, it was with fast increasing anxiety lest an inopportune visit from Mad Madge or some of her satellites should result in the discovery of the newly-made hole in the wall, in which case suspicion would surely be aroused, and the frustration of their cherished plans be the inevitable result. Happily, his fears on that score were groundless; and after waiting minutes that seemed like hours to his restless mind, he caught the glimmer of an approaching light, and knew his comrades were on hand at last.

One by one, the avengers glided noiselessly through the opening like so many grim phantoms—bold, resolute fellows, every man of whom fairly burned with impatience to be turned loose upon the outlaws.

"Hyar we are, at last, pard!" was Rufe Ruffle's whispered salutation. "Left part of the boys outside to intercept the varmints when we drive 'em out o' the cave. Jerusalem! Won't we jest give 'em their never-git-over?"

All that now prevented an immediate entrance to the main cavern was the huge slab of stone which, secured in some way from the outside, effectually blocked the narrow mouth of the passage. This was, however, an obstacle easily to be removed. A quantity of gunpowder was quickly placed under the edge of the stone, a train laid and the match applied, while all hands eagerly awaited the result at a safe distance.

There was a terrific explosion that shook the very walls, while the slab of stone was riven into a thousand fragments. No sooner was this last barrier removed than the avengers

rushed through the opening with triumphant shouts.

To their surprise, the great hall-like cavern was quite empty! Evidently the entire gang was massed outside, in readiness to repulse an expected attack from below. Even as the avengers crossed the cavern, a number of outlaws, alarmed by the explosion, suddenly appeared at the entrance.

They were met by a rattling volley that laid half their number low, while the remainder instantly turned and fled to rejoin the main body, ensconced a short distance down the mountain-side. Close at their heels followed the avengers, charging fiercely upon the bewildered enemy, firing as they went.

As Mad Madge's band, surprised but still undaunted, turned to resist this unexpected attack, the detachment of trailers left further down the hillside, who had eagerly awaited this opportunity for action, made a sudden and impetuous assault from the rear.

Then ensued a scene of wild confusion. The sharp explosion of firearms mingled with the loud shouts of excited combatants. The conflict, though fierce, was of but brief duration. Hemmed in on both sides by an irresistible foe, their numbers rapidly depleted by the endless storm of lead poured in upon them, the outlaws, after a short and ineffectual show of resistance, suddenly broke ranks and precipitately fled. The rout was complete. Like sheep they scattered in every direction, with the merciless avengers in hot pursuit, shooting them down without quarter.

Headlight Harry, in the mean time, finding victory assured, sought the interior of the cavern in search of Ruth Sharon. He was joined by Roy Noble, who had a similar purpose in view. The fair objects of their search were speedily discovered, none the worse for their trying experience; and the meeting between the lovers, as may well be imagined, was both tender and affecting.

Returning to the exterior of the cavern, they sought a position that commanded a view of the hillside below, and there awaited the return of the victorious outlaw-hunters. The sounds of conflict were constantly becoming fainter; evidently those of the band not slain outright had by this time been pretty thoroughly dispersed. As Headlight Harry surveyed the field of carnage, his mind reverted to the fair girl leader of the ill-starred victims. Had Mad Madge succeeded in making her escape? or was hers one of the numerous ghastly corpses that strewed the mountain-side?

Even as he questioned himself thus, a series of pistol-shots sounded in close proximity, and the next moment a slender, graceful form burst into view. It was Mad Madge, the Outlaw Queen! Fleeing like a deer, she was about to pass the little group, when suddenly she tripped and fell heavily at the very feet of the engineer, even as her pursuers appeared only a few yards behind.

Instantly Headlight Harry comprehended the situation, and, obeying a sudden impulse, he bounded forward.

"That way—that way, my lads! After him! Run the rascal to earth!" and he pointed toward a neighboring thicket as he spoke.

The trick worked like a charm, for, as Madge lay prone upon the earth, she was invisible to the pursuers; and the latter vanished as quickly as they came, quite unconscious of the engineer's clever ruse.

When Headlight Harry turned again to the Outlaw Queen, it was to find she had already struggled to her feet, and was regarding him intently. With garments soiled and torn, hair disheveled, and flying in the morning breeze—with face pale as death, scratched and bleeding from contact with thorns and brambles, and the wild light of fear and madness shining in her eyes—Mad Madge presented a spectacle of grief and woe at which all stood aghast.

"Why did you do that? Why did you turn those bloodhounds from their prey?" she demanded, in low, thrillingly earnest tones.

"To save your life, of course," was the engineer's response. "Those men undoubtedly knew not your sex, mistaking you for one of your followers, and would have killed you but for my timely interference."

"You are, indeed, magnanimous, to intercede in my behalf, especially after what I have done to you and yours," and the Queen's pale face clearly indicated her surprise.

"Let bygones be bygones, as the expression runs. Since your schemes have come to naught, I can easily afford to forgive your intentions," for in Headlight Harry's heart there remained nothing of resentment, only sympathy for this poor, misguided girl, whose grief for a beloved

parent really had crazed her brain, and who, he believed, was quite irresponsible for her numerous questionable actions and crimes.

"I am glad to know that you bear me no malice for the past. It would be hard, indeed, to die knowing that I bore the hatred and contempt of the one I love so dearly."

"Die?" echoed Headlight Harry, struck by the girl's peculiar tones.

"Yes, die! Do you not see this?" and Madge smiled bitterly as she indicated what all had failed to observe before—a ragged rent in her jacket, just below the heart, through which a tiny stream of blood was trickling.

"My God! You are wounded!" and Headlight Harry sprang forward, only to be waved back by the Outlaw Queen.

"Yes, I've got my death," she said, with strange calmness. "Your interference in my behalf was made too late to save me from the speeding bullet. I shall be with you but a short time longer. But, what matters it? My band is annihilated, my schemes for vengeance are nipped in the bud, and, should I live, it would be only to be hounded to death as an outlaw, as my father was before me. Is it not fitting that, with the death of my cherished hopes, the name of Mad Madge should, too, live only as a memory?"

The girl was rapidly growing weaker. She staggered and would have fallen, had not the vigilant engineer leaped forward and caught her in his arms. Kneeling upon the green sward, he gently pillowed the head of the dying Queen upon his knee, and as she looked up into his handsome, earnest face, there was a look of peace and happiness upon her own.

"I am dying—it is but a question of a few moments, now," she murmured. "And before I leave this world forever, there is one thing more I wish to say. The girl you love—Ruth Sharon! Is she not here? Then bid her come nearer, for what I have to say is for her ears, as well as yours."

"Listen! I have wronged both of you deeply, I know; not so much in evil actually performed as in that contemplated. It was for love of you, Headlight Harry, that I was led to lift my hand against a pure and innocent maiden. I know not why I did it. I was mad—mad with love for you! My passion got the better of my reason. God knows what my insane spirit might have led me to had not my plans been interrupted as they were. But now, all is over! You are happily reunited. Cannot you grant a dying woman's request, and assure her of your full forgiveness?"

"Indeed, I have already assured you that you are fully and freely forgiven," declared the engineer, seriously. "And I am sure that Ruth is equally ready to accord pardon for whatever intentions you may have had against her."

It was only through a storm of sobs and tears that Ruth could signify her acquiescence, being too deeply affected for coherent speech.

"The knowledge of your forgiveness will render death much easier to bear," exclaimed Mad Madge, faintly. "I know you love each other truly. May God bless you! and may your lives be as peaceful and happy as mine has been stormy and miserable, is my dying wish. Good-by!"

The Outlaw Queen ceased speaking; her eyes closed, and she lay as peacefully as a sleeping child in the arms of Headlight Harry. It was only when the graceful form grew cold and rigid, and the impulsive heart ceased to beat, that the awe-stricken watchers realized that Mad Madge was dead!

Dead! Lying there in the lonely forest, in the arms of the man she had loved so madly, and yet so hopelessly, with her once powerful band scattered to the winds—lying there with upturned face, kissed by the morning sun, wearing an angelic smile of happiness and peace! Who could realize that this beautiful form of mortal clay was all that remained of the fair and accomplished girl, once the village pride, whose insane desire to avenge her father's wrongs had led her to a life of violence and crime, the end of which was so highly disastrous to herself?

And now within the village churchyard she sleeps, beside the wayward father in avenging whose death she met her own; while ever in the memory of all lives the name of the beautiful being whose brief but brilliant career caused such a reign of terror in their midst—Mad Madge, the Outlaw Queen!

THE END.

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